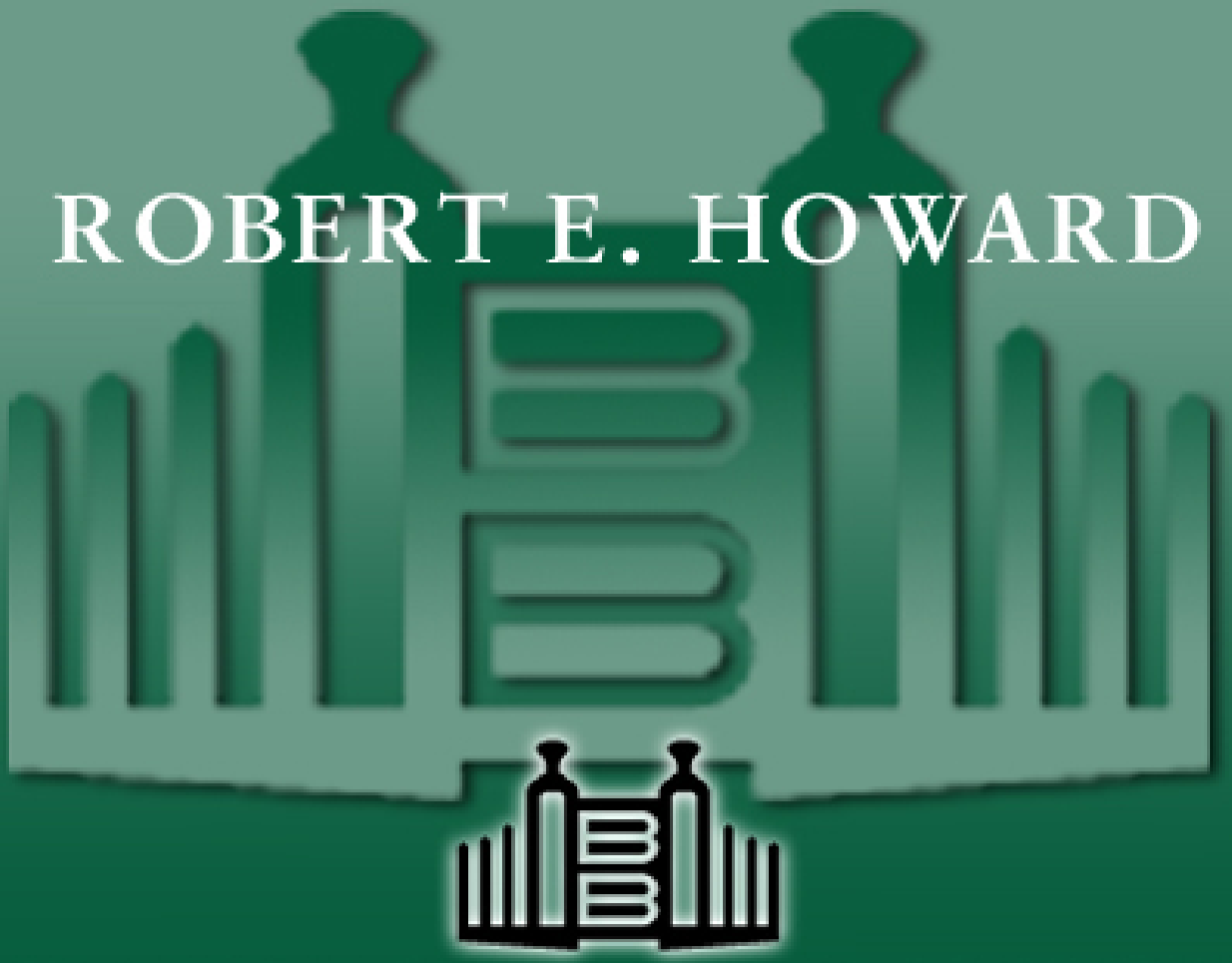
THE BEST OF ROBERT E. HOWARD VOLUME TWO

GRIM LANDS

ROBERT E. HOWARD



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THE FULLY ILLUSTRATED ROBERT E. HOWARD LIBRARY

from Del Rey Books

The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian

The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane

The Bloody Crown of Conan

Bran Mak Morn: The Last King

The Conquering Sword of Conan

Kull: Exile of Atlantis

The Best of Robert E. Howard

Volume 1: Crimson Shadows

The Best of Robert E. Howard

Volume 2: Grim Lands

OceanofPDF.com

OceanofPDF.com

GRIM LANDS

THE BEST OF
ROBERT E. HOWARD
~ VOLUME TWO ~

ILLUSTRATED BY
JIM & RUTH KEEGAN

BALLANTINE BOOKS DEL REY NEW YORK

OceanofPDF.com

The Best of Robert E. Howard, Volume Two, is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A Del Rey Trade Paperback Original

Copyright © 2007 by Robert E. Howard Properties, LLC

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Del Rey Books,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

DEL REY is a registered trademark and the Del Rey colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

The stories and related names, logos, characters, and distinctive likenesses herein may be trademarks or registered trademarks of Conan Properties International LLC, Kull Productions, Inc., Solomon Kane, Inc., or Robert E. Howard Properties, LLC.

This edition published by arrangement with Robert E. Howard Properties, LLC

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Howard, Robert Ervin, 1906–1936.
The best of Robert E. Howard; illustrated by Jim & Ruth Keegan.
p. cm.
"A Del Rey trade paperback original."
eISBN: 978-0-345-50250-6
I. Title.
PS3515.O842A6 2007
813′.52 – dc22 2007029740

www.delreybooks.com

v3.1

OceanofPDF.com

To Marcelo Anciano
Without whom …

Jim & Ruth Keegan

OceanofPDF.com

By This Axe I Rule!
first published in *King Kull*, 1967

The King and the Oak
first published in *Weird Tales*, February 1939

The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune
first published in *Weird Tales*, September 1929

The Tower of the Elephant
first published in *Weird Tales*, March 1933

Which Will Scarcely Be Understood
first published in *Weird Tales*, October 1937

Wings in the Night
first published in *Weird Tales*, July 1932

Solomon Kane's Homecoming
first published in *Fanciful Tales*, Fall 1936

Lord of Samarcand
first published in *Oriental Stories*, Spring 1932

Timur-Lang
first published in *The Howard Collector*, Summer 1964

A Song of the Naked Lands
first published in *A Song of the Naked Lands*, 1973

The Shadow of the Vulture
first published in *The Magic Carpet Magazine*, January 1934

Echoes from an Anvil
first published in *Verses in Ebony*, 1975

The Bull Dog Breed
first published in *Fight Stories*, February 1930

Black Harps in the Hills
first published in *Omniumgathum*, 1976

The Man on the Ground
first published in *Weird Tales*, July 1933

Old Garfield's Heart
first published in *Weird Tales*, December 1933

Vultures of Wahpeton
first published in *Smashing Novels*, December 1936 (as "Vultures of Whapeton")

Gents on the Lynch
first published in *Argosy*, October 17, 1936

The Grim Land
first published in *The Grim Land and Others*, 1976

Pigeons from Hell
first published in *Weird Tales*, May 1938

Never Beyond the Beast
first published in *The Ghost Ocean*, 1982

Wild Water
first published in *Cross Plains*, September 1975

Musings
first published in *Witchcraft & Sorcery*, January – February 1971

Son of the White Wolf
first published in *Thrilling Adventures*, December 1936

Black Vulmea's Vengeance
first published in *Golden Fleece*, November 1938

Flint's Passing
first published in *Fantasy Crossroads*, May 1975

Red Nails
first published in *Weird Tales*, July, August – September, October 1936

Cimmeria
first published in *The Howard Collector*, Winter 1965

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

Cover
Other Books by This Author
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication

Foreword
Introduction
By This Axe I Rule!
The King and the Oak
The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune
The Tower of the Elephant
Which Will Scarcely Be Understood
Wings in the Night
Solomon Kane's Homecoming
Lord of Samarcand
Timur-Lang
A Song of the Naked Lands
The Shadow of the Vulture
Echoes from an Anvil
The Bull Dog Breed
Black Harps in the Hills
The Man on the Ground
Old Garfield's Heart
Vultures of Wahpeton
Gents on the Lynch
The Grim Land
Pigeons from Hell
Never Beyond the Beast

Wild Water
Musings
Son of the White Wolf
Black Vulmea's Vengeance
Flint's Passing
Red Nails
Cimmeria

Appendices
Barbarian at the Pantheon-Gates
Notes on the Original Howard Texts

Sketchbook

OceanofPDF.com

Foreword

The first time we saw the layouts and illustrations for *The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane*, we couldn't believe our eyes. Here was an illustrated book of a variety that no one had tried to produce in decades. It was magnificent. In fact, it was difficult to imagine such a book actually being published in a world that didn't take the time for such things any longer.

Little did we realize that ten years later, that book would have become the first volume in an ongoing illustrated library collecting the works of Robert E. Howard, and that we would find ourselves illustrating the seventh and eighth volumes in that series.

And what a treat it's been.

Every paragraph of Howard's vivid prose has something that fires the artistic imagination. Pirates and knights. Cowboys and barbarians. Warrior women and monsters. Is there an artist alive who can resist such things?

The stories of Robert E. Howard challenge your inner kid – illustrator and reader alike – to come out and play, and stay out past dinner time.

Enjoy.

Jim & Ruth Keegan
Studio City, California
July 2007

OceanofPDF.com

Introduction

The "call to adventure" … signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown. This fateful region of both treasure and danger may be variously represented: as a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground, beneath the waves, or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop, or profound dream state; but it is always a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight.

–Joseph Campbell

No writer has ever answered the call to adventure with greater alacrity than Robert E. Howard, and few have proven superior to him in issuing that call to readers. For all that his stories appeared in the pages of pulp magazines during the era between the World Wars, they are always fresh, always modern, "always ready," as David Weber observes, "to teach another generation of writers how to tell the high, old tales of doom and glory," because they spring from that eternal well of hero tales from which the most enduring writers have drawn. His is the art of the bard, the *skald*, the *cyfarwydd*, the *seanchai*, the *griot*, the *hakawaty*, the *biwa hoshi*. Howard, in fact, may be said to have a direct connection to the oral tradition, as he is well attested to have talked his stories out, sometimes at the top of his voice, while he was writing, and to have been a spellbinding oral yarnspinner among his friends. The tales in this book, and in its companion volume, could well have been told around a fire, the audience listening raptly to the teller, surrounded, just outside the circle of light, by Mystery, and Adventure.

The telling of stories is as old as mankind, and many theorists believe that stories do much more than simply entertain us (though of course there's nothing wrong with that). They help us find a way to make sense of the world and our lives, to give a narrative

structure of meaning to what might otherwise seem a chaotic jumble of events. (In a startlingly postmodernist metanarrative within his loosely autobiographical novel, *Post Oaks & Sand Roughs*, written in 1928, Howard critiqued the very book he, and through him his fictional self, was in the act of writing: "It was too vague, too disconnected, too full of unexplained and trivial incidents – too much like life in a word.") Story helps us connect and explain the incidents of life, helps us understand who we are and where we are and how we are to behave in the world and our society.

Among the oldest and most popular types of stories are hero tales, centered around an individual who performs some notable deed, and in so doing demonstrates some type of exemplary behavior (or, alternatively, behaves in a way that brings about his comeuppance, thereby showing us how *not* to act). It is this type of story that most appealed to Robert E. Howard, and in this volume and its companion you will find many fine examples. They can be, and all too frequently have been, read superficially, as amusements to while away the idle hour. They work splendidly on that level, and as Joseph Campbell noted, "The storyteller fails or succeeds in proportion to the amusement he affords." For those who enjoy a fast-paced narrative expressed in direct yet poetic language, Howard succeeds marvelously. But in the best stories, there is more than amusement. "The function of the craft of the tale," says Campbell, "was not simply to fill the vacant hour but to fill it with symbolic fare." And here, too, Howard succeeds wonderfully. One of the real secrets of his enduring appeal, I think, is that he worked with archetypal materials almost directly, delving deeply into the reservoir of myth and dream to bring forth undisguised images and themes, to free them from the flowery conventions of "romance" that had accreted to them over the centuries, and to present them couched in language and in a worldview that was distinctly modern.

As Don Herron observed, at the same time Dashiell Hammett and the "hard-boiled" writers of *Black Mask* were dragging the mystery story out of the drawing rooms of the upper classes and onto the "mean streets" of the lower, Howard was hauling fantasy from the castles and magical forests to which it had long been relegated into

a grimmer, darker world that was not so far removed from the experience of postwar readers. His heroes are not always "good guys": they may be thieves, pirates, gunmen, feudists, outcasts guilty of terrible crimes. But they are good men, who adhere to strict inner codes of morality even when doing so conflicts with their self-interest. They match Raymond Chandler's famous description of the hard-boiled private eye: "a man … who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid … a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man … a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it … the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world … The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in." Says Herron, "Many critics have taken up the cause of Hammett and the *Black Mask* writers, arguing for the 'moral vision' in their work, but most … have missed similar themes in [Howard's] writing."

It is not within the scope of this introduction to examine the themes and imagery of Howard's tales: Steven Tompkins, in this volume, and Charles Hoffman, in its companion, have done an outstanding job of indicating something of the richness to be found in Howard's work, and there is a growing body of critical literature for those who are so inclined. Read simply for pleasure, or plumbed for the richness of its symbolic content and ideas, the work of Robert E. Howard will reward the reader on multiple levels.

As I noted in the introduction to the first volume, this is largely my personal selection of the stories and poems of Robert E. Howard that I think are his best. However, I was greatly aided by a poll I conducted among longtime Howard enthusiasts and scholars, and I have sought the advice of colleagues when I faced tough choices. To keep the books manageable, we've had to leave out some outstanding tales and verse, of course, and many Howard fans will undoubtedly find some of their favorites missing, as are some of my own. I do hope that, should the stories or poems in this book pique

your interest, you will seek out other collections: the excellent website Howard Works (www.howardworks.com) is the best online bibliographical resource.

Many of Howard's contemporaries in the weird fiction field agreed with H. P. Lovecraft that "the King Kull series probably forms a weird peak" to his work, remarkable considering that only three tales featuring Kull saw publication during Howard's lifetime. Two of these *(The Shadow Kingdom* and *Kings of the Night*, the latter generally considered a Bran Mak Morn story in which Kull is a guest character) were included in our first volume; the other, *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*, is presented here. It is a metaphysical reverie that almost amounts to a prose poem, and certainly leads one to wonder how some critics ever got the idea that Howard's barbarian characters were all brawn and no brains.

Unpublished during Howard's life, but among the finest of his Kull tales, was *By This Axe I Rule!* The story is not, strictly speaking, one of "swords and sorcery" – there is no fantasy element other than the setting itself. In this tale, the ostensible villains are the conspirators who hope to overthrow Kull, but I think the real villain is one more terrible than any other-worldly demon, nefarious sorcerer, or would-be assassins: it is the stultifying traditions and laws of an ancient society, inflexible rules that stifle and inhibit everyone, from king to servant. The lack of a fantasy element made the story unsuitable for Howard's primary market at the time, *Weird Tales*, while the imaginary antediluvian setting probably hurt it with the non-fantasy magazines to which he submitted it. A few years later Howard would rework the story considerably, turning it into the first of the Conan of Cimmeria tales, *The Phoenix on the Sword*. While the rewritten story was quite good, I'm not the only one who finds the Kull version superior: in my informal survey it outpolled the Conan version by almost three to one.

Conan, of course, proved to be a far more popular character with the readers, from the original *Weird Tales* appearances to the present day. This has been something of a mixed blessing: on the one hand, millions of people have become familiar with the character through comics, movies, role-playing games and other popular media, to the

point that, like Sherlock Holmes, Dracula, and Tarzan, the character is more widely known than his creator; on the other hand, though, many of those millions know the character *only* through the adaptations into other media, and the popular image of the fur-clad, muscle-bound, inarticulate barbarian is far from Howard's original conception. In *The Tower of the Elephant*, one of the earliest written of the series, a youthful Conan, not long out of the Cimmerian hills, finds himself derided as an outlandish heathen, but soon encounters one far more outlandish than himself. Anyone who thinks Conan is little more than a brute will find those preconceptions shattered in this tale of compassion, and of unearthly revenge.

The first of Howard's numerous series heroes to see publication was Solomon Kane, a somber Puritan adventurer and self-appointed redresser of wrongs. Believing himself to be acting as an instrument of God's will, Kane nevertheless, in occasional moments of self-awareness, recognizes that he is prompted as much by lust for adventure as by love of God. A rigid Puritan in his creed, he nonetheless consorts with a tribal shaman and carries a ju-ju staff given him by that worthy. *Wings in the Night* is one of the Kane stories set in Darkest Africa, that continent that so fired the imaginations of writers like Rider Haggard and Howard, and that largely existed only in the imagination. The "white-skinned conqueror" business at the end makes us rather uncomfortable today, but as Patrick Burger notes, "Solomon Kane is all about contradictions," and the text itself subverts one reading with another: the Aryan fighting man, we note, is standing with his ju-ju stave in one hand; the ardent Puritan who thanks the Lord for bringing him through was earlier the gibbering madman who "cursed the gods and devils who make mankind their sport, and he cursed Man who lives blindly on and blindly offers his back to the iron-hoofed feet of his gods." Kane is one of the most complex and fascinating characters in fantasy literature.

"There is no literary work, to me, half as zestful as rewriting history in the guise of fiction," Howard wrote to Lovecraft, so when Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales*, wrote him that he planned to start a new magazine of Oriental tales, and "especially want[ed]

historical tales – tales of the Crusades, of Genghis Khan, of Tamerlane, and the wars between Islam and Hindooism," Howard was excited enough to cut short a vacation trip with some friends and return to Cross Plains and start working to fill the order. He produced some of his very best work for that unfortunately shortlived magazine, first called *Oriental Stories* and then *The Magic Carpet Magazine*. We present two of them here, *Lord of Samarcand* and *The Shadow of the Vulture*, and we wish we could include more: in my opinion, these stories represent Howard at the very top of his game. In addition to these two, I would encourage readers to seek out *The Lion of Tiberias, The Sowers of the Thunder*, and *Hawks of Outremer*, in particular. The protagonists of these stories are flawed human beings, at times bordering on the psychopathic, and they fight for causes no more noble than they are. Howard has sometimes been taken to task for what some perceive as glorification of violence, but in these stories – and in the vast majority of his stories generally – there is no glory to be found in conflict, only dust and ashes. Of *Lord of Samarcand* he wrote, "There isn't a gleam of hope in it. It's the fiercest and most sombre thing I ever tried to write. A lot of milksops – maybe – will say it's too savage to be realistic, but to my mind, it's about the most realistic thing I ever attempted. But it's the sort of thing I like to write – no plot construction, no hero or heroine, no climax in the accepted sense of the word, all the characters complete scoundrels, and every-body double-crossing everybody else."

While much of Howard's fiction may seem unrelentingly grim, arguably his most commercial series, during his lifetime, consisted of humorous stories. A lifelong fan of boxing, in 1929 Howard sold his first story of the battling merchant sailor, Steve Costigan, and subsequently twenty-one of these rollicking misadventures appeared in the pages of *Fight Stories, Action Stories*, and *Jack Dempsey's Fight Magazine* (as well as one in *The Magic Carpet Magazine*, with Costigan's name changed to Dennis Dorgan, under the byline "Patrick Ervin"). "But don't be fooled by the slapstick nature of the stories," says Chris Gruber; "the themes of love, responsibility, sacrifice, and honor churn just beneath the surface of the rugged,

burlesque humor." And certainly Costigan and his other boxing characters stand alongside his great heroic fantasy characters in their refusal to give up, no matter how badly they may seem to be getting beaten.

In 1930, Howard began corresponding with that other great weird fictionist of the day, H. P. Lovecraft, and in short order the two were sending one another lengthy letters full of commentary, travelogue, anecdote, and argument: they debated art vs. commerce, law and order vs. individual freedom, and most famously, "civilization" vs. "barbarism." Very early in this correspondence, Lovecraft encouraged Howard to use his own Southwestern milieu as a background for his stories, as Lovecraft had done with New England and August Derleth, another *Weird Tales* writer with whom Howard would strike up a correspondence, had done with his native Wisconsin. This nudge sent Howard down the path of western writing, which would increasingly occupy him for the remainder of his short life.

The Man on the Ground is a very effective little vignette that reflects Howard's fascination with the fuedists of Texas, and with hatreds so strong that they become almost concrete, living things. Leo Grin has noted that, in Howard's work, "Heroes, villains, animals, plants, landscapes – all seethe and writhe with a breathtaking, unrelenting, very human emotionalism," and that "In Howard's worldview every obstacle – whether Man or Beast or Nature – becomes not just an impediment but an *enemy*, something not only to be battled but to be *hated."* Within the stories included in the two volumes of *The Best of Robert E. Howard* will be found ample evidence that Howard's characters are often driven by hate, to the point that their foes become no longer human but mere objects of that hatred. In this tale, and in the later *Red Nails*, we see that the hatreds born of feuds can become something like forces of nature, against which the individuals caught up in them are as helpless as they would be against a tempest. Again, I think it is important to recognize that, in writing about hatred as a motivating force, Howard is not advocating for it; as with his seemingly unrelenting focus on violent action, he is portraying an aspect of

human nature, one with which we find ourselves all too often confronted in the daily news.

In *Old Garfield's Heart*, Howard takes the admonition to write about his native environs literally: "Lost Knob" is his fictional version of Cross Plains, the small Central West Texas town in which he lived. Howard's love of Texas history and legend came not only from his reading but from talking with old pioneers, men and women who had lived through the frontier days of a region through which the last Indian raids had swept only about fifty years before this tale was written.

"The phenomenon of an outlaw looting a section under the guise of an officer of the law was not unknown in the early West – as witness Henry Plummer, and some others," Howard wrote Lovecraft. He went on to relate at some length episodes from the beginning and end of Hendry Brown's brief career as marshal of Caldwell, Kansas: the marshal had come to a bad end when he and some accomplices tried to rob the bank. Not long afterward, Howard told August Derleth that he had just written a thirty-thousand-word western story in which "my main character was drawn from Hendry Brown." That story was *Vultures of Wahpeton*, and along with passages from his letters, it strongly hints of the promise that Howard would someday write the epic of the Southwest he hoped for. Howard was a bit ahead of his time with the western: it would not be until several years after his death that the bleak worldview and the protagonist whose hat isn't white would come into their own in the western magazines.

Another of Howard's commercially successful series was his tall tales of Breckinridge Elkins, a mountain man with a heart of gold and a head of lead. An Elkins story ran in every issue of *Action Stories* from March 1934 until they ran out in October 1936, four months after Howard's death (a final story appeared in January 1937). When the editor of *Action Stories* moved over to *Argosy*, he asked Howard to provide a series similar to the Elkins. The young author had wanted to write for *Argosy* since he was a teenager, but one boxing story in 1929 had been all he had been able to manage, so he now took advantage of the opportunity and created Pike

Bearfield, of Wolf Mountain, Texas. Pike may be a little slow in the thinking department, but if there's mayhem in the offing he's likely to be right in the thick of it. *Gents on the Lynch* is a riotously funny tale, and is also interesting in that we here see Howard putting a humorous spin on a plot very similar to *Vultures of Wahpeton*, almost as if he'd asked himself what would happen if Breck Elkins, rather than Steve Corcoran, had been recruited as a deputy in Wahpeton.

Pigeons from Hell may not be the most chilling title in the world of horror fiction, but the story it heads is among the first rank. Based on tales the young Bob Howard had heard from an old former slave, while living briefly in the piney woods of East Texas, it is a tale of terror in an old deserted house, and of a ghastly revenge. There is some period racism, but we hope it won't mar your enjoyment of this chilling masterpiece. Lovecraft said of Howard, "Seldom if ever did he set down a lifeless stock character or situation and leave it as such. Before he concluded with it, it always took on some tinge of vitality and reality …" When Howard dealt with tropes of horror fiction, stock monsters like werewolves, vampires, and the like, he always gave them some unusual twist, something that made them uniquely his. In this tale, his creation of the *zuvembie* gives a Howardian spin to the zombie.

Wild Water finds Howard about as close to home as it is possible to get. Like *Old Garfield's Heart*, the story is set in the "Lost Knob" country, but it is based on an actual event that had taken place the year before the story was written. Some thirty miles south of Cross Plains lies the larger town of Brownwood, where Howard had attended his final year of high school and two years of commercial courses, and where he visited frequently with his good friends Clyde Smith and Truett Vinson. In 1931, work began on a dam eight miles north of Brownwood to impound water from the Pecan Bayou and Jim Ned Creek to create a reservoir. Engineers had estimated that it would take two years, at the normal rate of rainfall, to fill the reservoir. But on July 3, 1932, a torrential rain fell over the area, and the entire reservoir was filled, 7,000 acres filled to an average depth of more than twenty feet, in just six hours. It was the equivalent of suddenly diverting the flow of Niagara Falls into the

watershed of the two small creeks. The story also speaks eloquently of where Howard's sympathies resided during the Depression.

In Howard's library were two books on Thomas Edward Lawrence, "Lawrence of Arabia": Lawrence's own *Revolt in the Desert* and Lowell Thomas' *With Lawrence in Arabia*. Howard had a fascination with adventurers who "went native": Lawrence, Sir Richard F. Burton, "Chinese" Gordon, and many others. From these, and from the novels of Talbot Mundy, came the character Howard would claim was the first he ever conceived: Francis X. Gordon, known throughout the Orient as "El Borak," "the Swift."

"Some day I'm going to write stories about pirates and maybe cannibals," ten-year-old Robert Howard told a neighbor, a promise he would make good on. Conan follows the red trade at various times in his career, and one of the tales of Solomon Kane features pirates and makes clear that Kane had formerly sailed with them. With his creation of Black Terence Vulmea, Howard created a buccaneer worthy of joining that illustrious company, and with the interplay between Vulmea and Captain Wentworth in *Black Vulmea's Vengeance*, he shows how deftly he can handle a slow, subtle change in the interactions between two antagonists.

In my polling of Howard fans and scholars, the top-ranking Conan story was the last one Howard wrote, *Red Nails*. Writing to another great *Weird Tales* author, Clark Ashton Smith, Howard said, "Sent a three-part serial to Wright yesterday: 'Red Nails,' which I devoutly hope he'll like. A Conan yarn, and the grimmest, bloodiest and most merciless story of the series so far. Too much raw meat, maybe, but I merely portrayed what I honestly believe would be the reactions of certain types of people in the situations on which the plot of the story hung." Howard was fresh from a trip to Lincoln, New Mexico, site of the "Lincoln County War" and the exploits of one of his favorite outlaws, Billy the Kid. To Lovecraft he had written: "I think geography is the reason for the unusually savage and bloodthirsty manner in which the feud was fought out, a savagery that has impressed everyone who has ever made an intelligent study of the feud and the psychology behind it. The valley in which Lincoln lies is isolated from the rest of the world. Vast expanses of desert and

mountains separate it from the rest of humanity – deserts too barren to support human life. The people in Lincoln lost touch with the world. Isolated as they were, their own affairs, their relationship with one another, took on an importance and significance out of proportion to their actual meaning. Thrown together too much, jealousies and resentments rankled and grew, feeding upon themselves, until they reached monstrous proportions and culminated in those bloody atrocities which startled even the tough West of that day. Visualize that narrow valley, hidden away among the barren hills, isolated from the world, where its inhabitants inescapably dwelt side by side, hating and being hated, and at last killing and being killed. In such restricted, isolated spots, human passions smolder and burn, feeding on the impulses which give them birth, until they reached a point that can hardly be conceived by dwellers in more fortunate spots … I have heard of people going mad in isolated places; I believe the Lincoln County War was tinged with madness." In *Red Nails*, Howard limns the very apotheosis of the feud. It is also one of his most richly symbolic, mythological tales.

"Mr. Howard's poetry," wrote Lovecraft, in eulogizing his friend, "– weird, warlike, and adventurous – was no less notable than his prose. It had the true spirit of the ballad and the epic, and was marked by a pulsing rhythm and potent imagery of extremely distinctive cast." Howard was a natural poet, able to type out page after page of spontaneous, first-draft poetry of surprising quality in letters to his friend Clyde Smith, who responded in kind. While some of his verse was published in small poetry magazines, and a number of his best appeared in *Weird Tales*, Howard's preferences were for traditional forms such as the ballad and the sonnet that were falling out of favor. In his poetry we find many of the themes that inform his fiction, and in his fiction we frequently find his poetic voice. Indeed, Steve Tompkins says "His poetry … haunted his prose, imbuing it with an intensity and imagery that wedded drive and dream." And Steve Eng, whose magisterial "Barbarian Bard: The Poetry of Robert E. Howard" remains the best study of the subject, and among the finest essays on Howard's work in general,

observed, “Robert E Howard may have sensed that poetry suited his imagination better than did prose. His fictional Sword-and-Sorcery heroes and foes would seem to be more naturally chanted or sung about than portrayed in paragraphs.”

We hope that these two volumes of *The Best of Robert E. Howard* will introduce new readers to the breadth and depth of his work, and that they will even have some of his fans taking a deeper look. “What is essential in a work of art,” wrote Carl Jung, “is that it should rise far above the realm of personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as a man to the spirit and heart of mankind.” In using the ancient symbols and imagery and themes of the hero tale, Howard was able to speak from his own heart to ours, in language that is rich with meaning without being expository. “The artist is the one who communicates myth for today,” said Joseph Campbell. “But he has to be an artist who understands mythology and humanity and isn’t simply a sociologist with a program for you.” Or, as Hannah Arendt put it, “Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.”

So read the stories of Robert E. Howard for enjoyment – the meaning will reveal itself when you are ready for it.

Adventure is calling.

Rusty Burke
July 2007

OceanofPDF.com

By This Axe I Rule!

I

"My Songs Are Nails for a King's Coffin!"

"At midnight the king must die!"

The speaker was tall, lean and dark, and a crooked scar close to his mouth lent him an unusually sinister cast of countenance. His hearers nodded, their eyes glinting. There were four of these – one was a short fat man, with a timid face, weak mouth and eyes which bulged in an air of perpetual curiosity – another a great somber giant, hairy and primitive – the third a tall, wiry man in the garb of a jester whose flaming blue eyes flared with a light not wholly sane – and last a stocky dwarf of a man, inhumanly short and abnormally broad of shoulders and long of arms.

The first speaker smiled in a wintry sort of manner. "Let us take the vow, the oath that may not be broken – the Oath of the Dagger and the Flame. I trust you – oh, yes, of course. Still, it is better that there be assurance for all of us. I note tremors among some of you."

"That is all very well for you to say, Ascalante," broke in the short fat man. "You are an ostracized outlaw, anyway, with a price on your head – you have all to gain and nothing to lose, whereas we –"

"Have much to lose and more to gain," answered the outlaw imperturbably. "You called me down out of my mountain fastnesses to aid you in overthrowing a king – I have made the plans, set the snare, baited the trap and stand ready to destroy the prey – but I must be sure of your support. Will you swear?"

"Enough of this foolishness!" cried the man with the blazing eyes. "Aye, we will swear this dawn and tonight we will dance down a king! 'Oh, the chant of the chariots and the whir of the wings of the vultures – ' "

"Save your songs for another time, Ridondo," laughed Ascalante. "This is a time for daggers, not rhymes."

"My songs are nails for a king's coffin!" cried the minstrel, whipping out a long lean dagger. "Varlets, bring hither a candle! I shall be first to swear the oath!"

A silent and sombre slave brought a long taper and Ridondo pricked his wrist, bringing blood. One by one the other four followed his example, holding their wounded wrists carefully so that the blood should not drip yet. Then gripping hands in a sort of circle, with the lighted candle in the center, they turned their wrists so that the blood drops fell upon it. While it hissed and sizzled, they repeated:

"I, Ascalante, a landless man, swear the deed spoken and the silence covenanted, by the oath unbreakable!"

"And I, Ridondo, first minstrel of Valusia's courts!" cried the minstrel.

"And I, Volmana, count of Karaban," spoke the dwarf.

"And I, Gromel, commander of the Black Legion," rumbled the giant.

"And I, Kaanuub, baron of Blaal," quavered the short fat man, in a rather tremulous falsetto.

The candle sputtered and went out, quenched by the ruby drops which fell upon it.

"So fade the life of our enemy," said Ascalante, releasing his comrades' hands. He looked on them with carefully veiled contempt. The outlaw knew that oaths may be broken, even "unbreakable" ones, but he knew also that Kaanuub, of whom he was most distrustful, was superstitious. There was no use overlooking any safe guard, no matter how slight.

"Tomorrow," said Ascalante abruptly, "I mean today, for it is dawn now, Brule the Spear-slayer, the king's right hand man, departs from Grondar along with Ka-nu the Pictish ambassador, the Pictish escort and a goodly number of the Red Slayers, the king's bodyguard."

"Yes," said Volmana with some satisfaction. "That was your plan, Ascalante, but I accomplished it. I have kin high in the counsel of Grondar and it was a simple matter to indirectly persuade the king of Grondar to request the presence of Ka-nu. And of course, as Kull honors Ka-nu above all others, he must have a sufficient escort."

The outlaw nodded.

“Good. I have at last managed, through Gromel, to corrupt an officer of the Red Guard. This man will march his men away from the royal bedroom tonight just before midnight, on a pretext of investigating some suspicious noise or the like. The various sentries will have been disposed of. We will be waiting, we five, and sixteen desperate rogues of mine who I have summoned from the hills and who now hide in various parts of the city. Twenty-one against one –”

He laughed. Gromel nodded, Volmana grinned, Kaanuub turned pale; Ridondo smote his hands together and cried out ringingly:

“By Valka, they will remember this night, who strike the golden strings! The fall of the tyrant, the death of the despot – what songs I shall make!”

His eyes burned with a wild fanatical light and the others regarded him dubiously, all save Ascalante who bent his head to hide a grin. Then the outlaw rose suddenly.

“Enough! Get back to your places and not by word, deed or look do you betray what is in your minds.” He hesitated, eyeing Kaanuub. “Baron, your white face will betray you. If Kull comes to you and looks into your eyes with those icy grey eyes of his, you will collapse. Get you out to your country estate and wait until we send for you. Four are enough.”

Kaanuub almost collapsed then, from a reaction of joy; he left babbling incoherencies. The rest nodded to the outlaw and departed.

Ascalante stretched himself like a great cat and grinned. He called for a slave and one came, a somber evil looking fellow whose shoulders bore the scars of the brand that marks thieves.

“Tomorrow,” quoth Ascalante, taking the cup offered him, “I come into the open and let the people of Valusia feast their eyes upon me. For months now, ever since the Rebel Four summoned me from my mountains, I have been cooped in like a rat – living in the very heart of my enemies, hiding away from the light in the daytime, skulking masked through dark alleys and darker corridors at night. Yet I have accomplished what those rebellious lords could not. Working through them and through other agents, many of

whom have never seen my face, I have honeycombed the empire with discontent and corruption. I have bribed and subverted officials, spread sedition among the people – in short, I, working in the shadows, have paved the downfall of the king who at the moment sits throned in the sun. Ah, my friend, I had almost forgotten that I was a statesman before I was an outlaw, until Kaanuub and Volmana sent for me."

"You work with strange comrades," said the slave.

"Weak men, but strong in their ways," lazily answered the outlaw. "Volmana – a shrewd man, bold, audacious, with kin in high places – but poverty stricken, and his barren estates loaded with debts. Gromel – a ferocious beast, strong and brave as a lion, with considerable influence among the soldiers, but otherwise useless – lacking the necessary brains. Kaanuub, cunning in his low way and full of petty intrigue, but otherwise a fool and a coward – avaricious but possessed of immense wealth, which has been essential in my schemes. Ridondo, a mad poet, full of hare-brained schemes – brave but flighty. A prime favorite with the people because of his songs which tear out their heart-strings. He is our best bid for popularity, once we have achieved our design. I am the power that has welded these men, useless without me."

"Who mounts the throne, then?"

"Kaanuub, of course – or so he thinks! He has a trace of royal blood in him – the old dynasty, the blood of that king whom Kull killed with his bare hands. A bad mistake of the present king. He knows there are men who still boast descent from the old dynasty but he lets them live. So Kaanuub plots for the throne. Volmana wishes to be reinstated in favor, as he was under the old regime, so that he may lift his estate and title to their former grandeur. Gromel hates Kelka, commander of the Red Slayers, and thinks he should have that position. He wishes to be commander of all Valusia's armies. As to Ridondo – bah! I despise the man and admire him at the same time. He is your true idealist. He sees in Kull, an outlander and a barbarian, merely a rough footed, red handed savage who has come out of the sea to invade a peaceful and pleasant land. He already idolizes the king Kull slew, forgetting the rogue's vile

nature. He forgets the inhumanities under which the land groaned during his reign, and he is making the people forget. Already they sing 'The Lament for the King' in which Ridondo lauds the saintly villain and vilifies Kull as 'that black hearted savage' – Kull laughs at these songs and indulges Ridondo, but at the same time wonders why the people are turning against him."

"But why does Ridondo hate Kull?"

"Because he is a poet, and poets always hate those in power, and turn to dead ages for relief in dreams. Ridondo is a flaming torch of idealism and he sees himself as a hero, a stainless knight, which he is, rising to overthrow the tyrant."

"And you?"

Ascalante laughed and drained the goblet. "I have ideas of my own. Poets are dangerous things, because they believe what they sing – at the time. Well, I believe what I think. And I think Kaanuub will not hold the throne seat overlong. A few months ago I had lost all ambitions save to waste the villages and the caravans as long as I lived. Now, well – now we shall see."

II

"*Then* I Was The Liberator – *Now* –"

A room strangely barren in contrast to the rich tapestries on the walls and the deep carpets on the floor. A small writing table, behind which sat a man. This man would have stood out in a crowd of a million. It was not so much because of his unusual size, his height and great shoulders, though these features lent to the general effect. But his face, dark and immobile, held the gaze and his narrow grey eyes beat down the wills of the onlookers by their icy magnetism. Each movement he made, no matter how slight, betokened steel spring muscles and brain knit to those muscles with perfect coordination. There was nothing deliberate or measured about his motions – either he was perfectly at rest – still as a bronze statue, or else he was in motion, with that cat-like quickness which blurred the sight that tried to follow his movements. Now this man rested his chin on his fists, his elbows on the writing table, and

gloomily eyed the man who stood before him. This man was occupied in his own affairs at the moment, for he was tightening the laces of his breast-plate. Moreover he was abstractedly whistling – a strange and unconventional performance, considering that he was in the presence of a king.

"Brule," said the king, "this matter of statecraft wearies me as all the fighting I have done never did."

"A part of the game, Kull," answered Brule. "You are king – you must play the part."

"I wish that I might ride with you to Grondar," said Kull enviously. "It seems ages since I had a horse between my knees – but Tu says that affairs at home require my presence. Curse him!

"Months and months ago," he continued with increasing gloom, getting no answer and speaking with freedom, "I overthrew the old dynasty and seized the throne of Valusia – of which I had dreamed ever since I was a boy in the land of my tribesmen. That was easy. Looking back now, over the long hard path I followed, all those days of toil, slaughter and tribulation seem like so many dreams. From a wild tribesman in Atlantis, I rose, passing through the galleys of Lemuria – a slave for two years at the oars – then an outlaw in the hills of Valusia – then a captive in her dungeons – a gladiator in her arenas – a soldier in her armies – a commander – a king!

"The trouble with me, Brule, I did not dream far enough. I always visualized merely the seizing of the throne – I did not look beyond. When king Borna lay dead beneath my feet, and I tore the crown from his gory head, I had reached the ultimate border of my dreams. From there, it has been a maze of illusions and mistakes. I prepared myself to seize the throne – not to hold it.

"When I overthrew Borna, *then* people hailed me wildly – *then* I was The Liberator – *now* they mutter and stare blackly behind my back – they spit at my shadow when they think I am not looking. They have put a statue of Borna, that dead swine, in the Temple of the Serpent and people go and wail before him, hailing him as a saintly monarch who was done to death by a red handed barbarian. When I led her armies to victory as a soldier, Valusia overlooked the fact that I was a foreigner – now she cannot forgive me.

“And now, in the Temple of the Serpent, there come to burn incense to Borna’s memory, men whom his executioners blinded and maimed, fathers whose sons died in his dungeons, husbands whose wives were dragged into his seraglio – Bah! Men are all fools.”

“Ridondo is largely responsible,” answered the Pict, drawing his sword belt up another notch. “He sings songs that make men mad. Hang him in his jester’s garb to the highest tower in the city. Let him make rhymes for the vultures.”

Kull shook his lion head. “No, Brule, he is beyond my reach. A great poet is greater than any king. He hates me, yet I would have his friendship. His songs are mightier than my sceptre, for time and again he has near torn the heart from my breast when he chose to sing for me. I will die and be forgotten, his songs will live forever.”

The Pict shrugged his shoulders. “As you like; you are still king, and the people cannot dislodge you. The Red Slayers are yours to a man, and you have all Pictland behind you. We are barbarians, together, even if we have spent most of our lives in this land. I go, now. You have naught to fear save an attempt at assassination, which is no fear at all, considering the fact that you are guarded night and day by a squad of the Red Slayers.”

Kull lifted his hand in a gesture of farewell and the Pict clanked out the room.

Now another man wished his attention, reminding Kull that a king’s time was never his own.

This man was a young noble of the city, one Seno val Dor. This famous young swordsman and reprobate presented himself before the king with the plain evidence of much mental perturbation. His velvet cap was rumpled and as he dropped it to the floor when he kneeled, the plume drooped miserably. His gaudy clothing showed stains as if in his mental agony he had neglected his personal appearance for some time.

“King, lord king,” he said in tones of deep sincerity. “If the glorious record of my family means anything to your majesty, if my own fealty means anything, for Valka’s sake, grant my request.”

“Name it.”

“Lord king, I love a maiden – without her I cannot live. Without me, she must die. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep for thinking of her. Her beauty haunts me day and night – the radiant vision of her divine loveliness –”

Kull moved restlessly. He had never been a lover.

“Then in Valka’s name, marry her!”

“Ah,” cried the youth, “there’s the rub. She is a slave, Ala by name, belonging to one Volmana, count of Karaban. It is on the black books of Valusian law that a noble cannot marry a slave. It has always been so. I have moved high heaven and get only the same reply. ‘Noble and slave can never wed.’ It is fearful. They tell me that never in the history of the empire before has a nobleman wanted to marry a slave! What is that to me? I appeal to you as a last resort!”

“Will not this Volmana sell her?”

“He would, but that would hardly alter the case. She would still be a slave and a man cannot marry his own slave. Only as a wife I want her. Any other way would be hollow mockery. I want to show her to all the world, rigged out in the ermine and jewels of val Dor’s wife! But it cannot be, unless you can help me. She was born a slave, of a hundred generations of slaves, and slave she will be as long as she lives and her children after her. And as such she cannot marry a freeman.”

“Then go into slavery with her,” suggested Kull, eyeing the youth narrowly.

“This I desired,” answered Seno, so frankly that Kull instantly believed him. “I went to Volmana and said: ‘You have a slave whom I love; I wish to wed her. Take me, then, as your slave so that I may be ever near her.’ He refused with horror; he would sell me the girl, or give her to me but he would not consent to enslave me. And my father has sworn on the unbreakable oath to kill me if I should so degrade the name of val Dor as to go into slavery. No, lord king, only you can help us.”

Kull summoned Tu and laid the case before him. Tu, chief councillor, shook his head. “It is written in the great iron bound

books, even as Seno has said. It has ever been the law, and it will always be the law. A noble may not mate with a slave."

"Why may I not change that law?" queried Kull.

Tu laid before him a tablet of stone whereon the law was engraved.

"For thousands of years this law has been – see, Kull, on the stone it was carved by the primal law makers, so many centuries ago a man might count all night and still not number them all. Neither you, nor any other king, may alter it."

Kull felt suddenly the sickening, weakening feeling of utter helplessness which had begun to assail him of late. Kingship was another form of slavery, it seemed to him – he had always won his way by carving a path through his enemies with his great sword – how could he prevail against solicitous and respectful friends who bowed and flattered and were adamant against anything new, or any change – who barricaded themselves and their customs with traditions and antiquity and quietly defied him to change – anything?

"Go," he said with a weary wave of his hand. "I am sorry. But I cannot help you."

Seno val Dor wandered out of the room, a broken man, if hanging head and bent shoulders, dull eyes and dragging steps mean anything.

III

"I Thought You a Human Tiger!"

A cool wind whispered through the green woodlands. A silver thread of a brook wound among great tree boles, whence hung large vines and gayly festooned creepers. A bird sang and the soft late summer sunlight was sifted through the interlocking branches to fall in gold and blackvelvet patterns of shade and light on the grass covered earth. In the midst of this pastoral quietude, a little slave girl lay with her face between her soft white arms, and wept as if her little heart would break. The bird sang but she was deaf; the brook called her but she was dumb; the sun shone but she was blind

– all the universe was a black void in which only pain and tears were real.

So she did not hear the light footfall nor see the tall broad shouldered man who came out of the bushes and stood above her. She was not aware of his presence until he knelt and lifted her, wiping her eyes with hands as gentle as a woman's.

The little slave girl looked into a dark immobile face, with cold narrow grey eyes which just now were strangely soft. She knew this man was not a Valusian from his appearance, and in these troublous times it was not a good thing for little slave girls to be caught in the lonely woods by strangers, especially foreigners, but she was too miserable to be afraid and besides the man looked kind.

"What's the matter, child?" he asked and because a woman in extreme grief is likely to pour her sorrows out to anyone who shows interest and sympathy she whimpered: "Oh, sir, I am a miserable girl! I love a young nobleman –"

"Seno val Dor?"

"Yes, sir." She glanced at him in surprize. "How did you know? He wishes to marry me and today having striven in vain elsewhere for permission, he went to the king himself. But the king refused to aid him."

A shadow crossed the stranger's dark face. "Did Seno say the king refused?"

"No – the king summoned the chief councillor and argued with him awhile, but gave in. Oh," she sobbed, "I knew it would be useless! The laws of Valusia are unalterable! No matter how cruel or unjust! They are greater than the king."

The girl felt the muscles of the arms supporting her swell and harden into great iron cables. Across the stranger's face passed a bleak and hopeless expression.

"Aye," he muttered, half to himself, "the laws of Valusia are greater than the king."

Telling her troubles had helped her a little and she dried her eyes. Little slave girls are used to troubles and to suffering, though this one had been unusually kindly used all her life.

"Does Seno hate the king?" asked the stranger.

She shook her head. “He realizes the king is helpless.”

“And you?”

“And I what?”

“Do you hate the king?”

Her eyes flared – shocked. “I! Oh sir, who am I, to hate the king? Why, why, I never thought of such a thing.”

“I am glad,” said the man heavily. “After all, little one, the king is only a slave like yourself, locked with heavier chains.”

“Poor man,” she said, pityingly though not exactly understanding, then she flamed into wrath. “But I do hate the cruel laws which the people follow! Why should laws not change? Time never stands still! Why should people today be shackled by laws which were made for our barbarian ancestors thousands of years ago –” she stopped suddenly and looked fearfully about.

“Don’t tell,” she whispered, laying her head in an appealing manner on her companion’s iron shoulder. “It is not fit that a woman, and a slave girl at that, should so unashamedly express herself on such public matters. I will be spanked if my mistress or my master hears of it!”

The big man smiled. “Be at ease, child. The king himself would not be offended at your sentiments; indeed I believe that he agrees with you.”

“Have you seen the king?” she asked, her childish curiosity overcoming her misery for the moment.

“Often.”

“And is he eight feet tall,” she asked eagerly, “and has he horns under his crown, as the common people say?”

“Scarcely,” he laughed. “He lacks nearly two feet of answering your description as regards height; as for size he might be my twin brother. There is not an inch difference in us.”

“Is he as kind as you?”

“At times; when he is not goaded to frenzy by a statecraft which he cannot understand and by the vagaries of a people which can never understand him.”

“Is he in truth a barbarian?”

“In very truth; he was born and spent his early boyhood among the heathen barbarians who inhabit the land of Atlantis. He dreamed a dream and fulfilled it. Because he was a great fighter and a savage swordsman, because he was crafty in actual battle, because the barbarian mercenaries in Valusian armies loved him, he became king. Because he is a warrior and not a politician, because his swordsmanship helps him now not at all, his throne is rocking beneath him.”

“And he is very unhappy.”

“Not all the time,” smiled the big man. “Sometimes when he slips away alone and takes a few hours holiday by himself among the woods, he is almost happy. Especially when he meets a pretty girl like –”

The girl cried out in sudden terror, slipping to her knees before him: “Oh, sire, sire, have mercy! I did not know – you are the king!”

“Don’t be afraid.” Kull knelt beside her again and put an arm about her, feeling her trembling from head to foot. “You said I was kind –”

“And so you are, sire,” she whispered weakly. “I – I thought you were a human tiger, from what men said, but you are kind and tender – b-but – you are k-king and I –”

Suddenly in a very agony of confusion and embarrassment, she sprang up and fled, vanishing instantly. The overcoming realization that the king, whom she had only dreamed of seeing at a distance some day, was actually the man to whom she had told her pitiful woes, overcame her and filled her with an abasement and embarrassment which was an almost physical terror.

Kull sighed and rose. The affairs of the palace were calling him back and he must return and wrestle with problems concerning the nature of which he had only the vaguest idea and concerning the solving of which he had no idea at all.

IV
“Who Dies First?”

Through the utter silence which shrouded the corridors and halls of the palace, fourteen figures stole. Their stealthy feet, cased in soft leather shoes, made no sound either on thick carpet or bare marble tile. The torches which stood in niches along the halls gleamed redly on bared dagger, broad sword blade and keen edged axe.

“Easy, easy all!” hissed Ascalante, halting for a moment to glance back at his followers. “Stop that cursed loud breathing, whoever it is! The officer of the night guard has removed all the guards from these halls, either by direct order or by making them drunk, but we must be careful. Lucky it is for us that those cursed Picts – the lean wolves – are either revelling at the consulate or riding to Grondar. Hist! back – here come the guard!”

They crowded back behind a huge pillar which might have hidden a whole regiment of men, and waited. Almost immediately ten men swung by; tall brawny men, in red armor, who looked like iron statues. They were heavily armed and the faces of some showed a

slight uncertainty. The officer who led them was rather pale. His face was set in hard lines and he lifted a hand to wipe sweat from his brow as the guard passed the pillar where the assassins hid. He was young and this betraying of a king came not easy to him.

They clanked by and passed on up the corridor.

"Good!" chuckled Ascalante. "He did as I bid; Kull sleeps unguarded! Haste, we have work to do! If they catch us killing him, we are undone, but a dead king is easy to make a mere memory. Haste!"

"Aye haste!" cried Ridondo.

They hurried down the corridor with reckless speed and stopped before a door.

"Here!" snapped Ascalante. "Gromel – break me open this door!"

The giant launched his mighty weight against the panel. Again – this time there was a rending of bolts, a crash of wood and the door staggered and burst inward.

"In!" shouted Ascalante, on fire with the spirit of murder.

"In!" roared Ridondo. "Death to the tyrant –"

They halted short – Kull faced them – not a naked Kull, roused out of deep sleep, mazed and unarmed to be butchered like a sheep, but a Kull wakeful and ferocious, partly clad in the armor of a Red Slayer, with a long sword in his hand.

Kull had risen quietly a few minutes before, unable to sleep. He had intended to ask the officer of the guard into his room to converse with him awhile, but on looking through the spy-hole of the door, had seen him leading his men off. To the suspicious brain of the barbarian king had leaped the assumption that he was being betrayed. He never thought of calling the men back, because they were supposedly in the plot too. There was no good reason for this desertion. So Kull had quietly and quickly donned the armor he kept at hand, nor had he completed this act when Gromel first hurtled against the door.

For a moment the tableau held – the four rebel noblemen at the door and the ten wild desperate outlaws crowding close behind them – held at bay by the terrible-eyed silent giant who stood in the middle of the royal bedroom, sword at the ready.

Then Ascalante shouted: “In! And slay him! He is one to fourteen and he has no helmet!”

True; there had been lack of time to put on the helmet, nor was there now time to snatch the great shield from where it hung on the wall. Be that as it may, Kull was better protected than any of the assassins except Gromel and Volmana who were in full armor, with their vizors closed.

With a yell that rang to the roof, the killers flooded into the room. First of all was Gromel. He came in like a charging bull, head down, sword low for the disembowelling thrust. And Kull sprang to meet him like a tiger charging a bull, and all the king’s weight and mighty strength went into the arm that swung the sword. In a whistling arc the great blade flashed through the air to crash down on the commander’s helmet. Blade and helmet clashed and flew to pieces together and Gromel rolled lifeless on the floor, while Kull bounded back, gripping the bladeless hilt.

“Gromel!” he snarled as the shattered helmet disclosed the shattered head, then the rest of the pack were upon him. He felt a dagger point rake along his ribs and flung the wielder aside with a swing of his great left arm. He smashed his broken hilt square between another’s eyes and dropped him senseless and bleeding to the floor.

“Watch the door, four of you!” screamed Ascalante, dancing about the edge of that whirlpool of singing steel, for he feared Kull, with his great weight and speed, might smash through their midst and escape. Four rogues drew back and ranged themselves before the single door. And in that instant Kull leaped to the wall and tore therefrom an ancient battle axe which had hung there for possibly a hundred years.

Back to the wall he faced them for a moment, then leaped among them. No defensive fighter was Kull! He always carried the fight to the enemy. A sweep of the axe dropped an outlaw to the floor with a severed shoulder – the terrible back-hand stroke crushed the skull of another. A sword shattered against his breast-plate – else he had died. His concern was to protect his uncovered head and the spaces between breast plate and back plate – for Valusian armor was

intricate and he had had no time to fully arm himself. Already he was bleeding from wounds on the cheek and the arms and legs, but so swift and deadly he was, and so much the fighter that even with the odds so greatly on their side, the assassins hesitated to leave an opening. Moreover their own numbers hampered them.

For one moment they crowded him savagely, raining blows, then they gave back and ringed him, thrusting and parrying – a couple of corpses on the floor gave mute evidence of the unwisdom of their first plan.

"Knaves!" screamed Ridondo in a rage, flinging off his slouch cap, his wild eyes glaring. "Do ye shrink from the combat? Shall the despot live? Out on it!"

He rushed in, thrusting viciously; but Kull, recognizing him, shattered his sword with a tremendous short chop and, with a push, sent him reeling back to sprawl on the floor. The king took in his left arm the sword of Ascalante and the outlaw only saved his life by ducking Kull's axe and bounding backward. One of the hairy bandits dived at Kull's legs hoping to bring him down in that manner, but after wrestling for a brief instant at what seemed a solid iron tower, he glanced up just in time to see the axe falling, but not in time to avoid it. In the interim one of his comrades had lifted a sword with both hands and hewed downward with such downright sincerity that he cut through Kull's shoulder plate on the left side, and wounded the shoulder beneath. In an instant the king's breast plate was full of blood.

Volmana, flinging the attackers to right and left in his savage impatience, came ploughing through and hacked savagely at Kull's unprotected head. Kull ducked and the sword whistled above, shaving off a lock of hair – ducking the blows of a dwarf like Volmana is difficult for a man of Kull's height.

Kull pivoted on his heel and struck from the side, as a wolf might leap, in a wide level arc – Volmana dropped with his whole left side caved in and the lungs gushing forth.

"Volmana!" Kull spoke the word rather breathlessly. "I'd know that dwarf in Hell –"

He straightened to defend himself from the maddened rush of Ridondo who charged in wild and wide open, armed only with a dagger. Kull leaped back, axe high.

"Ridondo!" his voice rang sharply. "Back! I would not harm you –"

"Die, tyrant!" screamed the mad minstrel, hurling himself headlong on the king. Kull delayed the blow he was loath to deliver until it was too late. Only when he felt the bite of steel in his unprotected side did he strike, in a frenzy of blind desperation.

Ridondo dropped with a shattered skull and Kull reeled back against the wall, blood spurting through the fingers which gripped his wounded side.

"In, now, and get him!" yelled Ascalante, preparing to lead the attack.

Kull placed his back to the wall and lifted his axe. He made a terrible and primordial picture. Legs braced far apart, head thrust forward, one red hand clutching at the wall for support, the other gripping the axe on high, while the ferocious features were frozen in a death snarl of hate, and the icy eyes blazed through the mist of blood which veiled them. The men hesitated; the tiger might be dying but he was still capable of dealing death.

"Who dies first?" snarled Kull through smashed and bloody lips.

Ascalante leaped as a wolf leaps – halted almost in mid-air with the unbelievable speed which characterized him, and fell prostrate to avoid the death that was hissing toward him in the form of a red axe. He frantically whirled his feet out of the way and rolled clear just as Kull recovered from his missed blow and struck again – this time the axe sank four inches into the polished wood floor close to Ascalante's revolving legs.

Another desperado rushed at this instant, followed half heartedly by his fellows. The first villain had figured on reaching Kull and killing him before he could get his axe out of the floor, but he miscalculated the king's speed, or else he started his rush a second too late. At any rate the axe lurched up and crashed down and the rush halted abruptly as a reddened caricature of a man was catapulted back against their legs.

At that moment a hurried clanking of feet sounded down the hall and the rogues in the door raised a shout: “Soldiers coming!”

Ascalante cursed and his men deserted him like rats leaving a sinking ship. They rushed out into the hall – or limped, splattering blood – and down the corridor a hue and cry was raised, and pursuit started.

Save for the dead and dying men on the floor, Kull and Ascalante stood alone in the royal bed room. Kull’s knees were buckling and he leaned heavily against the wall, watching the outlaw with the eyes of a dying wolf.

“All seems to be lost, particularly honor,” he murmured. “However the king is dying on his feet – and –” whatever other cogitation might have passed through his mind is not known for at that moment he ran lightly at Kull just as the king was employing his axe arm to wipe the blood from his half blind eyes. A man with a sword at the ready can thrust quicker than a wounded man out of position can strike with an axe that weighs his weary arm like lead.

But even as Ascalante began his thrust, Seno val Dor appeared at the door and flung something through the air which glittered, sang and ended its flight in Ascalante’s throat. The outlaw staggered, dropped his sword and sank to the floor at Kull’s feet, flooding them with the flow of a severed jugular – mute witness that Seno’s war-skill included knife throwing as well. Kull looked down bewilderedly at the dead outlaw and Ascalante’s dead eyes stared back in seeming mockery, as if the owner still maintained the futility of kings and outlaws, of plots and counter-plots.

Then Seno was supporting the king, the room was flooded with men-at-arms in the uniform of the great val Dor family and Kull realized that a little slave girl was holding his other arm.

“Kull, Kull, are you dead?” val Dor’s face was very white.

“Not yet,” the king spoke huskily. “Staunch this wound in my left side – if I die ‘twill be from it; ‘tis deep but the rest are not mortal – Ridondo wrote me a deathly song there! Cram stuff into it for the present – I have work to do.”

They obeyed wonderingly and as the flow of blood ceased, Kull though literally bled white already, felt some slight access of

strength. The palace was fully aroused now. Court ladies, lords, men-at-arms, councillors, all swarmed about the place babbling. The Red Slayers were gathering, wild with rage, ready for anything, jealous of the fact that others had aided their king. Of the young officer who had commanded the door guard, he had slipped away in the darkness and neither then nor later was he in evidence, though earnestly sought after.

Kull, still keeping stubbornly to his feet, grasping his bloody axe with one hand and Seno's shoulder with another singled out Tu, who stood wringing his hands and ordered: "Bring me the tablet whereon is engraved the law concerning slaves."

"But lord king –"

"Do as I say!" howled Kull, lifting the axe and Tu scurried to obey.

As he waited and the court women flocked about him, dressing his wounds and trying gently but vainly to pry his iron fingers from about the bloody axe handle, Kull heard Seno's breathless tale.

"–Ala heard Kaanuub and Volmana plotting – she had stolen into a little nook to cry over her – our troubles, and Kaanuub came, on his way to his country estate. He was shaking with terror for fear plans might go awry and he made Volmana go over the plot with him again before he left, so he might know there was no flaw in it.

"He did not leave until it was late, and then Ala stole away and came to me. But it is a long way from Volmana's city house to the house of val Dor, a long way for a little girl to walk, and though I gathered my men and came instantly, we almost arrived too late."

Kull gripped his shoulder.

"I will not forget."

Tu entered with the law tablet, laying it reverently on the table.

Kull shouldered aside all who stood near him and stood up alone.

"Hear, people of Valusia," he exclaimed, upheld by the wild beast vitality which was his, fired from within by a strength which was more than physical. "I stand here – the king. I am wounded almost unto death, but I have survived mass wounds.

"Hear you! I am weary of this business! I am no king but a slave! I am hemmed in by laws, laws, laws! I cannot punish malefactors nor

reward my friends because of law – custom – tradition! By Valka, I will be king in fact as well as in name!

"Here stand the two who have saved my life! Henceforward they are free to marry, to do as they like!"

Seno and Ala rushed into each other's arms with a glad cry.

"But the law!" screamed Tu.

"I am the law!" roared Kull, swinging up his axe; it flashed downward and the stone tablet flew into a hundred pieces. The people clenched their hands in horror, waiting dumbly for the sky to fall.

Kull reeled back, eyes blazing. The room whirled to his dizzy gaze.

"I am king, state and law!" he roared, and seizing the wand-like sceptre which lay near, he broke it in two and flung it from him. "This shall be my sceptre!" The red axe was brandished aloft, splashing the pallid nobles with drops of blood. Kull gripped the slender crown with his left hand and placed his back against the wall. Only that support kept him from falling but in his arms was still the strength of lions.

"I am either king or corpse!" he roared, his corded muscles bulging, his terrible eyes blazing. "If you like not my kingship – come and take this crown!"

The corded left arm held out the crown, the right gripping the menacing axe above it.

"By this axe I rule! This is my sceptre! I have struggled and sweated to be the puppet king you wished me to be – to king it your way. Now I use mine own way! If you will not fight, you shall obey! Laws that are just shall stand; laws that have outlived their times I shall shatter as I shattered that one! *I am king!*"

Slowly the pale faced noblemen and frightened women knelt, bowing in fear and reverence to the blood stained giant who towered above them with his eyes ablaze.

"I am king!"

OceanofPDF.com

The King and the Oak

Before the shadows slew the sun the kites were soaring free,
And Kull rode down the forest road, his red sword at his knee;
And winds were whispering round the world: “King Kull rides to the sea.”

The sun died crimson in the sea, the long grey shadows fell;
The moon rose like a silver skull that wrought a demon’s spell,
For in its light great trees stood up like specters out of Hell.

In spectral light the trees stood up, inhuman monsters dim;
Kull thought each trunk a living shape, each branch a knotted limb,
And strange unmortal evil eyes flamed horribly at him.

The branches writhed like knotted snakes, they beat against the night,
And one great oak with swayings stiff, horrific in his sight,
Tore up its roots and blocked his way, grim in the ghostly light.

They grappled in the forest way, the king and grisly oak;
Its great limbs bent him in their grip, but never a word was spoke;
And futile in his iron hand, the stabbing dagger broke.

And through the tossing, monstrous trees there sang a dim refrain
Fraught deep with twice a million years of evil, hate and pain:
“We were the lords ere man had come, and shall be lords again.”

Kull sensed an empire strange and old that bowed to man’s advance
As kingdoms of the grassblades bow before the marching ants,
And horror gripped him; in the dawn like someone in a trance

He strove with bloody hands against a still and silent tree;
As from a nightmare dream he woke; a wind blew down the lea
And Kull of high Atlantis rode silent to the sea.

OceanofPDF.com

The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune

A wild, weird clime that lieth sublime
Out of Space, out of Time.

– Poe

THERE comes, even to kings, the time of great weariness. Then the gold of the throne is brass, the silk of the palace becomes drab. The gems in the diadem and upon the fingers of the women sparkle drearily like the ice of the white seas; the speech of men is as the empty rattle of a jester's bell and the feel comes of things unreal; even the sun is copper in the sky and the breath of the green ocean is no longer fresh.

Kull sat upon the throne of Valusia and the hour of weariness was upon him. They moved before him in an endless, meaningless panorama, men, women, priests, events and shadows of events; things seen and things to be attained. But like shadows they came and went, leaving no trace upon his consciousness, save that of a great mental fatigue. Yet Kull was not tired. There was a longing in him for things beyond himself and beyond the Valusian court. An unrest stirred in him and strange, luminous dreams roamed his soul. At his bidding there came to him Brule the Spear-slayer, warrior of Pictland, from the islands beyond the West.

"Lord king, you are tired of the life of the court. Come with me upon my galley and let us roam the tides for a space."

"Nay." Kull rested his chin moodily upon his mighty hand. "I am weary beyond all these things. The cities hold no lure for me – and the borders are quiet. I hear no more the sea-songs I heard when I lay as a boy on the booming crags of Atlantis, and the night was alive with blazing stars. No more do the green woodlands beckon me as of old. There is a strangeness upon me and a longing beyond life's longings. Go!"

Brule went forth in a doubtful mood, leaving the king brooding upon his throne. Then to Kull stole a girl of the court and whispered:

“Great king, seek Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The secrets of life and death are his, and the stars in the sky and the lands beneath the seas.”

Kull looked at the girl. Fine gold was her hair and her violet eyes were slanted strangely; she was beautiful, but her beauty meant little to Kull.

“Tuzun Thune,” he repeated. “Who is he?”

“A wizard of the Elder Race. He lives here, in Valusia, by the Lake of Visions in the House of a Thousand Mirrors. All things are known to him, lord king; he speaks with the dead and holds converse with the demons of the Lost Lands.”

Kull arose.

“I will seek out this mummer; but no word of my going, do you hear?”

“I am your slave, my lord.” And she sank to her knees meekly, but the smile of her scarlet mouth was cunning behind Kull’s back and the gleam of her narrow eyes was crafty.

KULL came to the house of Tuzun Thune, beside the Lake of Visions. Wide and blue stretched the waters of the lake and many a fine palace rose upon its banks; many swan-winged pleasure boats drifted lazily upon its hazy surface and evermore there came the sound of soft music.

Tall and spacious, but unpretentious, rose the House of a Thousand Mirrors. The great doors stood open and Kull ascended the broad stair and entered, unannounced. There in a great chamber, whose walls were of mirrors, he came upon Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The man was ancient as the hills of Zalgara; like wrinkled leather was his skin, but his cold gray eyes were like sparks of sword steel.

“Kull of Valusia, my house is yours,” said he, bowing with old-time courtliness and motioning Kull to a throne-like chair.

“You are a wizard, I have heard,” said Kull bluntly, resting his chin upon his hand and fixing his somber eyes upon the man’s face. “Can you do wonders?”

The wizard stretched forth his hand; his fingers opened and closed like a bird's claws.

"Is that not a wonder – that this blind flesh obeys the thoughts of my mind? I walk, I breathe, I speak – are they all not wonders?"

Kull meditated awhile, then spoke. "Can you summon up demons?"

"Aye. I can summon up a demon more savage than any in ghostland – by smiting you in the face."

Kull started, then nodded. "But the dead, can you talk to the dead?"

"I talk with the dead always – as I am talking now. Death begins with birth and each man begins to die when he is born; even now you are dead, King Kull, because you were born."

"But you, you are older than men become; do wizards never die?"

"Men die when their time comes. No later, no sooner. Mine has not come."

Kull turned these answers over in his mind.

"Then it would seem that the greatest wizard of Valusia is no more than an ordinary man, and I have been duped in coming here."

Tuzun Thune shook his head. "Men are but men, and the greatest men are they who soonest learn the simpler things. Nay, look into my mirrors, Kull."

The ceiling was a great many mirrors, and the walls were mirrors, perfectly jointed, yet many mirrors of many sizes and shapes.

"Mirrors are the world, Kull," droned the wizard. "Gaze into my mirrors and be wise."

Kull chose one at random and looked into it intently. The mirrors upon the opposite wall were reflected there, reflecting others, so that he seemed to be gazing down a long, luminous corridor, formed by mirror behind mirror; and far down this corridor moved a tiny figure. Kull looked long ere he saw that the figure was the reflection of himself. He gazed and a queer feeling of pettiness came over him; it seemed that that tiny figure was the true Kull, representing the real proportions of himself. So he moved away and stood before another.

“Look closely, Kull. That is the mirror of the past,” he heard the wizard say.

Gray fogs obscured the vision, great billows of mist, ever heaving and changing like the ghost of a great river; through these fogs Kull caught swift fleeting visions of horror and strangeness; beasts and men moved there and shapes neither men nor beasts; great exotic blossoms glowed through the grayness; tall tropic trees towered high over reeking swamps, where reptilian monsters wallowed and bellowed; the sky was ghastly with flying dragons and the restless seas rocked and roared and beat endlessly along the muddy beaches. Man was not, yet man was the dream of the gods and strange were the nightmare forms that glided through the noisome jungles. Battle and onslaught were there, and frightful love. Death was there, for Life and Death go hand in hand. Across the slimy beaches of the world sounded the bellowing of the monsters, and incredible shapes loomed through the steaming curtain of the incessant rain.

“This is of the future.”

Kull looked in silence.

“See you – what?”

“A strange world,” said Kull heavily. “The Seven Empires are crumbled to dust and are forgotten. The restless green waves roar for many a fathom above the eternal hills of Atlantis; the mountains of Lemuria of the West are the islands of an unknown sea. Strange savages roam the elder lands and new lands flung strangely from the deeps, defiling the elder shrines. Valusia is vanished and all the nations of today; they of tomorrow are strangers. They know us not.”

“Time strides onward,” said Tuzun Thune calmly. “We live today; what care we for tomorrow – or yesterday? The Wheel turns and nations rise and fall; the world changes, and times return to savagery to rise again through the long ages. Ere Atlantis was, Valusia was, and ere Valusia was, the Elder Nations were. Aye, we, too, trampled the shoulders of lost tribes in our advance. You, who have come from the green sea hills of Atlantis to seize the ancient crown of Valusia, you think my tribe is old, we who held these lands ere the Valusians came out of the East, in the days before there were

men in the sea lands. But men were here when the Elder Tribes rode out of the waste lands, and men before men, tribe before tribe. The nations pass and are forgotten, for that is the destiny of man."

"Yes," said Kull. "Yet is it not a pity that the beauty and glory of men should fade like smoke on a summer sea?"

"For what reason, since that is their destiny? I brood not over the lost glories of my race, nor do I labor for races to come. Live now, Kull, live now. The dead are dead; the unborn are not. What matters men's forgetfulness of you when you have forgotten yourself in the silent worlds of death? Gaze in my mirrors and be wise."

Kull chose another mirror and gazed into it.

"That is the mirror of the deepest magic; what see ye, Kull?"

"Naught but myself."

"Look closely, Kull; is it in truth you?"

Kull stared into the great mirror, and the image that was his reflection returned his gaze.

"I come before this mirror," mused Kull, chin on fist, "and I bring this man to life. This is beyond my understanding, since first I saw him in the still waters of the lakes of Atlantis, till I saw him again in the gold-rimmed mirrors of Valusia. He is I, a shadow of myself, part of myself – I can bring him into being or slay him at my will; yet" – he halted, strange thoughts whispering through the vast dim recesses of his mind like shadowy bats flying through a great cavern – "yet where is he when I stand not in front of a mirror? May it be in man's power thus lightly to form and destroy a shadow of life and existence? How do I know that when I step back from the mirror he vanishes into the void of Naught?

"Nay, by Valka, am I the man or is he? Which of us is the ghost of the other? Mayhap these mirrors are but windows through which we look into another world. Does he think the same of me? Am I no more than a shadow, a reflection of himself – to him, as he to me? And if I am the ghost, what sort of a world lives upon the other side of this mirror? What armies ride there and what kings rule? This world is all I know. Knowing naught of any other, how can I judge? Surely there are green hills there and booming seas and wide plains

where men ride to battle. Tell me, wizard who are wiser than most men, tell me, are there worlds beyond our worlds?"

"A man has eyes, let him see," answered the wizard. "Who would see must first believe."

THE hours drifted by and Kull still sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune, gazing into that which depicted himself. Sometimes it seemed that he gazed upon hard shallowness; at other times gigantic depths seemed to loom before him. Like the surface of the sea was the mirror of Tuzun Thune; hard as the sea in the sun's slanting beams, in the darkness of the stars, when no eye can pierce her deeps; vast and mystic as the sea when the sun smites her in such way that the watcher's breath is caught at the glimpse of tremendous abysses. So was the mirror in which Kull gazed.

At last the king rose with a sigh and took his departure still wondering. And Kull came again to the House of a Thousand Mirrors; day after day he came and sat for hours before the mirror. The eyes looked out at him, identical with his, yet Kull seemed to sense a difference – a reality that was not of him. Hour upon hour he would stare with strange intensity into the mirror; hour after hour the image gave back his gaze.

The business of the palace and of the council went neglected. The people murmured; Kull's stallion stamped restlessly in his stable and Kull's warriors diced and argued aimlessly with one another. Kull heeded not. At times he seemed on the point of discovering some vast, unthinkable secret. He no longer thought of the image in the mirror as a shadow of himself; the thing, to him, was an entity, similar in outer appearance, yet basically as far from Kull himself as the poles are far apart. The image, it seemed to Kull, had an individuality apart from Kull's; he was no more dependent on Kull than Kull was dependent on him. And day by day Kull doubted in which world he really lived; was he the shadow, summoned at will by the other? Did he instead of the other live in a world of delusion, the shadow of the real world?

Kull began to wish that he might enter the personality beyond the mirror for a space, to see what might be seen; yet should he manage to go beyond that door could he ever return? Would he find a world identical with the one in which he moved? A world, of which his was but a ghostly reflection? Which was reality and which illusion?

At times Kull halted to wonder how such thoughts and dreams had come to enter his mind and at times he wondered if they came of his own volition or – here his thoughts would become mazed. His meditations were his own; no man ruled his thoughts and he would summon them at his pleasure; yet could he? Were they not as bats, coming and going, not at his pleasure but at the bidding or ruling of – of whom? The gods? The Women who wove the webs of Fate? Kull could come to no conclusion, for at each mental step he became more and more bewildered in a hazy gray fog of illusory assertions and refutations. This much he knew: that strange visions entered his mind, like bats flying unbidden from the whispering void of nonexistence; never had he thought these thoughts, but now they ruled his mind, sleeping and waking, so that he seemed to walk in a daze at times; and his sleep was fraught with strange, monstrous dreams.

"Tell me, wizard," he said, sitting before the mirror, eyes fixed intently upon his image, "how can I pass yon door? For of a truth, I am not sure that that is the real world and this the shadow; at least, that which I see must exist in some form."

"See and believe," droned the wizard. "Man must believe to accomplish. Form is shadow, substance is illusion, materiality is dream; man is because he believes he is; what is man but a dream of the gods? Yet man can be that which he wishes to be; form and substance, they are but shadows. The mind, the ego, the essence of the god-dream – that is real, that is immortal. See and believe, if you would accomplish, Kull."

The king did not fully understand; he never fully understood the enigmatical utterances of the wizard, yet they struck somewhere in his being a dim responsive chord. So day after day he sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. Ever the wizard lurked behind him like a shadow.

THEN came a day when Kull seemed to catch glimpses of strange lands; there flitted across his consciousness dim thoughts and recognitions. Day by day he had seemed to lose touch with the world; all things had seemed each succeeding day more ghostly and unreal; only the man in the mirror seemed like reality. Now Kull seemed to be close to the doors of some mightier worlds; giant vistas gleamed fleetingly; the fogs of unreality thinned, "form is shadow, substance is illusion; they are but shadows" sounded as if from some far country of his consciousness. He remembered the wizard's words and it seemed to him that now he almost understood – form and substance, could not he change himself at will, if he knew the master key that opened this door? What worlds within what worlds awaited the bold explorer?

The man in the mirror seemed smiling at him – closer, closer – a fog enwrapped all and the reflection dimmed suddenly – Kull knew a sensation of fading, of change, of merging –

"Kull!" the yell split the silence into a million vibratory fragments!

Mountains crashed and worlds tottered as Kull, hurled back by that frantic shout, made a superhuman effort, how or why he did not know.

A crash, and Kull stood in the room of Tuzun Thune before a shattered mirror, mazed and half blind with bewilderment. There before him lay the body of Tuzun Thune, whose time had come at last, and above him stood Brule the Spear-slayer, sword dripping red and eyes wide with a kind of horror.

"Valka!" swore the warrior. "Kull, it was time I came!"

"Aye, yet what happened?" The king groped for words.

"Ask this traitress," answered the Spear-slayer, indicating a girl who crouched in terror before the king; Kull saw that it was she who first sent him to Tuzun Thune. "As I came in I saw you fading into yon mirror as smoke fades into the sky, by Valka! Had I not seen I would not have believed – you had almost vanished when my shout brought you back."

“Aye,” muttered Kull, “I had almost gone beyond the door that time.”

“This fiend wrought most craftily,” said Brule. “Kull, do you not now see how he spun and flung over you a web of magic? Kaanuub of Blaal plotted with this wizard to do away with you, and this wench, a girl of Elder Race, put the thought in your mind so that you would come here. Kananu of the council learned of the plot today; I know not what you saw in that mirror, but with it Tuzun Thune enthralled your soul and almost by his witchery he changed your body to mist –”

“Aye.” Kull was still mazed. “But being a wizard, having knowledge of all the ages and despising gold, glory and position, what could Kaanuub offer Tuzun Thune that would make of him a foul traitor?”

“Gold, power and position,” grunted Brule. “The sooner you learn that men are men whether wizard, king or thrall, the better you will rule, Kull. Now what of her?”

“Naught, Brule,” as the girl whimpered and groveled at Kull’s feet. “She was but a tool. Rise, child, and go your ways; none shall harm you.”

Alone with Brule, Kull looked for the last time on the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

“Mayhap he plotted and conjured, Brule; nay, I doubt you not, yet – was it his witchery that was changing me to thin mist, or had I stumbled on a secret? Had you not brought me back, had I faded in dissolution or had I found worlds beyond this?”

Brule stole a glance at the mirrors, and twitched his shoulders as if he shuddered. “Aye. Tuzun Thune stored the wisdom of all the hells here. Let us begone, Kull, ere they bewitch me, too.”

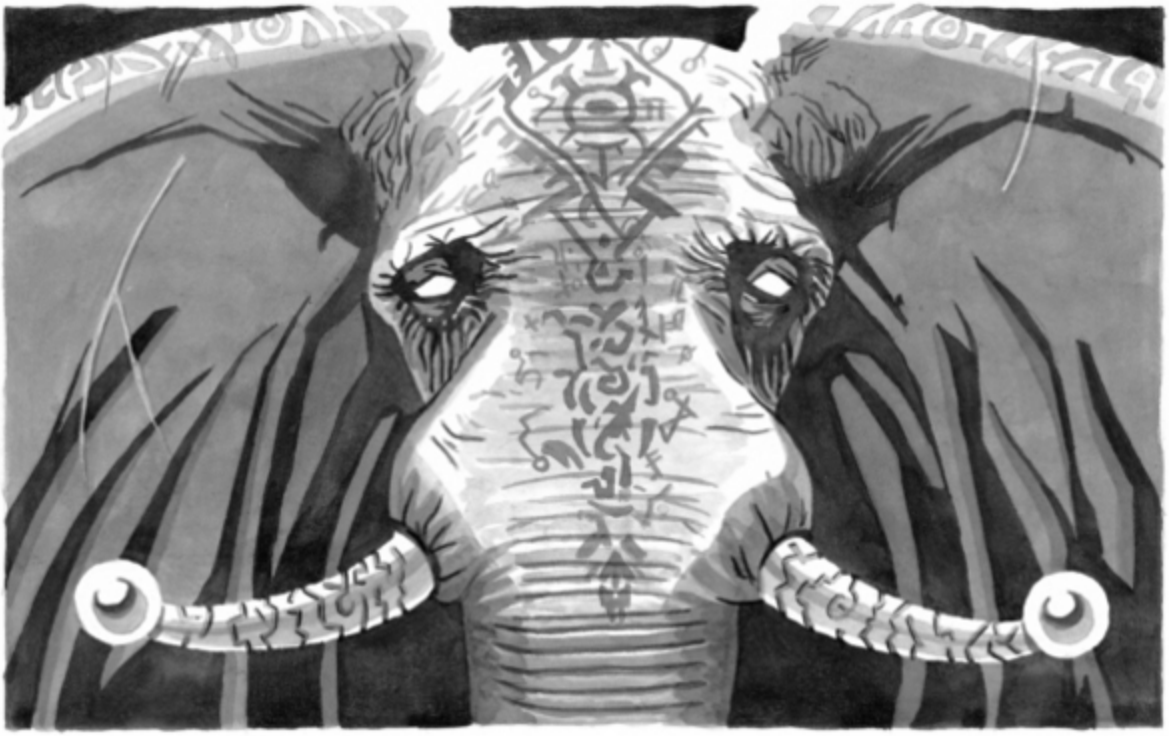
“Let us go, then,” answered Kull, and side by side they went forth from the House of a Thousand Mirrors – where, mayhap, are prisoned the souls of men.

NONE look now in the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. The pleasure boats shun the shore where stands the wizard’s house and no one goes in

the house or to the room where Tuzun Thune's dried and withered carcass lies before the mirrors of illusion. The place is shunned as a place accursed, and though it stands for a thousand years to come, no footsteps shall echo there. Yet Kull upon his throne meditates often upon the strange wisdom and untold secrets hidden there and wonders….

For there are worlds beyond worlds, as Kull knows, and whether the wizard bewitched him by words or by mesmerism, vistas did open to the king's gaze beyond that strange door, and Kull is less sure of reality since he gazed into the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

OceanofPDF.com



The Tower of the Elephant

Torches flared murkily on the revels in the Maul, where the thieves of the east held carnival by night. In the Maul they could carouse and roar as they liked, for honest people shunned the quarters, and watchmen, well paid with stained coins, did not interfere with their sport. Along the crooked, unpaved streets with their heaps of refuse and sloppy puddles, drunken roisterers staggered, roaring. Steel glinted in the shadows where wolf preyed on wolf, and from the darkness rose the shrill laughter of women, and the sounds of scufflings and strugglings. Torchlight licked luridly from broken windows and wide-thrown doors, and out of those doors, stale smells of wine and rank sweaty bodies, clamor of drinking-jacks and fists hammered on rough tables, snatches of obscene songs, rushed like a blow in the face.

In one of these dens merriment thundered to the low smoke-stained roof, where rascals gathered in every stage of rags and tatters – furtive cut-purses, leering kidnappers, quick-fingered thieves, swaggering bravoes with their wenches, strident-voiced women clad in tawdry finery. Native rogues were the dominant element – dark-skinned, dark-eyed Zamorians, with daggers at their girdles and guile in their hearts. But there were wolves of half a dozen outland nations there as well. There was a giant Hyperborean renegade, taciturn, dangerous, with a broadsword strapped to his great gaunt frame – for men wore steel openly in the Maul. There was a Shemitish counterfeiter, with his hook nose and curled blue-black beard. There was a bold-eyed Brythunian wench, sitting on the knee of a tawny-haired Gunderman – a wandering mercenary soldier, a deserter from some defeated army. And the fat gross rogue whose bawdy jests were causing all the shouts of mirth was a professional kidnapper come up from distant Koth to teach woman-stealing to Zamorians who were born with more knowledge of the art than he could ever attain.

This man halted in his description of an intended victim's charms, and thrust his muzzle into a huge tankard of frothing ale. Then blowing the foam from his fat lips, he said, "By Bel, god of all

thieves, I'll show them how to steal wenches: I'll have her over the Zamorian border before dawn, and there'll be a caravan waiting to receive her. Three hundred pieces of silver, a count of Ophir promised me for a sleek young Brythunian of the better class. It took me weeks, wandering among the border cities as a beggar, to find one I knew would suit. And is she a pretty baggage!"

He blew a slobbery kiss in the air.

"I know lords in Shem who would trade the secret of the Elephant Tower for her," he said, returning to his ale.

A touch on his tunic sleeve made him turn his head, scowling at the interruption. He saw a tall, strongly made youth standing beside him. This person was as much out of place in that den as a gray wolf among mangy rats of the gutters. His cheap tunic could not conceal the hard, rangy lines of his powerful frame, the broad heavy shoulders, the massive chest, lean waist, and heavy arms. His skin was brown from outland suns, his eyes blue and smoldering; a shock of tousled black hair crowned his broad forehead. From his girdle hung a sword in a worn leather scabbard.

The Kothian involuntarily drew back; for the man was not one of any civilized race he knew.

"You spoke of the Elephant Tower," said the stranger, speaking Zamorian with an alien accent. "I've heard much of this tower; what is its secret?"

The fellow's attitude did not seem threatening, and the Kothian's courage was bolstered up by the ale, and the evident approval of his audience. He swelled with self-importance.

"The secret of the Elephant Tower?" he exclaimed. "Why, any fool knows that Yara the priest dwells there with the great jewel men call the Elephant's Heart, that is the secret of his magic."

The barbarian digested this for a space.

"I have seen this tower," he said. "It is set in a great garden above the level of the city, surrounded by high walls. I have seen no guards. The walls would be easy to climb. Why has not somebody stolen this secret gem?"

The Kothian stared wide-mouthed at the other's simplicity, then burst into a roar of derisive mirth, in which the others joined.

"Harken to this heathen!" he bellowed. "He would steal the jewel of Yara! – Harken, fellow," he said, turning portentously to the other, "I suppose you are some sort of a northern barbarian –"

"I am a Cimmerian," the outlander answered, in no friendly tone. The reply and the manner of it meant little to the Kothian; of a kingdom that lay far to the south, on the borders of Shem, he knew only vaguely of the northern races.

"Then give ear and learn wisdom, fellow," said he, pointing his drinking-jack at the discomfited youth. "Know that in Zamora, and more especially in this city, there are more bold thieves than anywhere else in the world, even Koth. If mortal man could have stolen the gem, be sure it would have been filched long ago. You speak of climbing the walls, but once having climbed, you would quickly wish yourself back again. There are no guards in the gardens at night for a very good reason – that is, no human guards. But in the watch-chamber, in the lower part of the tower, are armed men, and even if you passed those who roam the gardens by night, you must still pass through the soldiers, for the gem is kept somewhere in the tower above."

"But if a man *could* pass through the gardens," argued the Cimmerian, "why could he not come at the gem through the upper part of the tower and thus avoid the soldiers?"

Again the Kothian gaped at him.

"Listen to him!" he shouted jeeringly. "The barbarian is an eagle who would fly to the jeweled rim of the tower, which is only a hundred and fifty feet above the earth, with rounded sides slicker than polished glass!"

The Cimmerian glared about, embarrassed at the roar of mocking laughter that greeted this remark. He saw no particular humor in it, and was too new to civilization to understand its discourtesies. Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing. He was bewildered and chagrined, and doubtless

would have slunk away, abashed, but the Kothian chose to goad him further.

"Come, come!" he shouted. "Tell these poor fellows, who have only been thieves since before you were spawned, tell them how you would steal the gem!"

"There is always a way, if the desire be coupled with courage," answered the Cimmerian shortly, nettled.

The Kothian chose to take this as a personal slur. His face grew purple with anger.

"What!" he roared. "You dare tell us our business, and intimate that we are cowards? Get along; get out of my sight!" And he pushed the Cimmerian violently.

"Will you mock me and then lay hands on me?" grated the barbarian, his quick rage leaping up; and he returned the push with an open-handed blow that knocked his tormenter back against the rude-hewn table. Ale splashed over the jack's lip, and the Kothian roared in fury, dragging at his sword.

"Heathen dog!" he bellowed. "I'll have your heart for that!"

Steel flashed and the throng surged wildly back out of the way. In their flight they knocked over the single candle and the den was plunged in darkness, broken by the crash of upset benches, drum of flying feet, shouts, oaths of people tumbling over one another, and a single strident yell of agony that cut the din like a knife. When a candle was relighted, most of the guests had gone out by doors and broken windows, and the rest huddled behind stacks of wine-kegs and under tables. The barbarian was gone; the center of the room was deserted except for the gashed body of the Kothian. The Cimmerian, with the unerring instinct of the barbarian, had killed his man in the darkness and confusion.

II

The lurid lights and drunken revelry fell away behind the Cimmerian. He had discarded his torn tunic, and walked through the night naked except for a loin-cloth and his high-strapped

sandals. He moved with the supple ease of a great tiger, his steely muscles rippling under his brown skin.

He had entered the part of the city reserved for the temples. On all sides of him they glittered white in the starlight – snowy marble pillars and golden domes and silver arches, shrines of Zamora's myriad strange gods. He did not trouble his head about them; he knew that Zamora's religion, like all things of a civilized, long-settled people, was intricate and complex, and had lost most of the pristine essence in a maze of formulas and rituals. He had squatted for hours in the courtyards of the philosophers, listening to the arguments of theologians and teachers, and come away in a haze of bewilderment, sure of only one thing, and that, that they were all touched in the head.

His gods were simple and understandable; Crom was their chief, and he lived on a great mountain, whence he sent forth dooms and death. It was useless to call on Crom, because he was a gloomy, savage god, and he hated weaklings. But he gave a man courage at birth, and the will and might to kill his enemies, which, in the Cimmerian's mind, was all any god should be expected to do.

His sandalled feet made no sound on the gleaming pave. No watchmen passed, for even the thieves of the Maul shunned the temples, where strange dooms had been known to fall on violators. Ahead of him he saw, looming against the sky, the Tower of the Elephant. He mused, wondering why it was so named. No one seemed to know. He had never seen an elephant, but he vaguely understood that it was a monstrous animal, with a tail in front as well as behind. This a wandering Shemite had told him, swearing that he had seen such beasts by the thousands in the country of the Hyrkanians; but all men knew what liars were the men of Shem. At any rate, there were no elephants in Zamora.

The shimmering shaft of the tower rose frostily in the stars. In the sunlight it shone so dazzlingly that few could bear its glare, and men said it was built of silver. It was round, a slim perfect cylinder, a hundred and fifty feet in height, and its rim glittered in the starlight with the great jewels which crusted it. The tower stood among the waving exotic trees of a garden raised high above the

general level of the city. A high wall enclosed this garden, and outside the wall was a lower level, likewise enclosed by a wall. No lights shone forth; there seemed to be no windows in the tower – at least not above the level of the inner wall. Only the gems high above sparkled frostily in the starlight.

Shrubbery grew thick outside the lower, or outer wall. The Cimmerian crept close and stood beside the barrier, measuring it with his eye. It was high, but he could leap and catch the coping with his fingers. Then it would be child's play to swing himself up and over, and he did not doubt that he could pass the inner wall in the same manner. But he hesitated at the thought of the strange perils which were said to await within. These people were strange and mysterious to him; they were not of his kind – not even of the same blood as the more westerly Brythunians, Nemedians, Kothians and Aquilonians, whose civilized mysteries had awed him in times past. The people of Zamora were very ancient, and, from what he had seen of them, very evil.

He thought of Yara, the high priest, who worked strange dooms from this jeweled tower, and the Cimmerian's hair prickled as he remembered a tale told by a drunken page of the court – how Yara had laughed in the face of a hostile prince, and held up a glowing, evil gem before him, and how rays shot blindingly from that unholy jewel, to envelop the prince, who screamed and fell down, and shrank to a withered blackened lump that changed to a black spider which scampered wildly about the chamber until Yara set his heel upon it.

Yara came not often from his tower of magic, and always to work evil on some man or some nation. The king of Zamora feared him more than he feared death, and kept himself drunk all the time because that fear was more than he could endure sober. Yara was very old – centuries old, men said, and added that he would live for ever because of the magic of his gem, which men called the Heart of the Elephant, for no better reason than they named his hold the Elephant's Tower.

The Cimmerian, engrossed in these thoughts, shrank quickly against the wall. Within the garden some one was passing, who walked with a measured stride. The listener heard the clink of steel. So after all a guard did pace those gardens. The Cimmerian waited, expected to hear him pass again, on the next round, but silence rested over the mysterious gardens.

At last curiosity overcame him. Leaping lightly he grasped the wall and swung himself up to the top with one arm. Lying flat on the broad coping, he looked down into the wide space between the walls. No shrubbery grew near him, though he saw some carefully trimmed bushes near the inner wall. The starlight fell on the even sward and somewhere a fountain tinkled.

The Cimmerian cautiously lowered himself down on the inside and drew his sword, staring about him. He was shaken by the nervousness of the wild at standing thus unprotected in the naked starlight, and he moved lightly around the curve of the wall, hugging its shadow, until he was even with the shrubbery he had noticed. Then he ran quickly toward it, crouching low, and almost tripped over a form that lay crumpled near the edges of the bushes.

A quick look to right and left showed him no enemy in sight at least, and he bent close to investigate. His keen eyes, even in the dim starlight, showed him a strongly built man in the silvered armor and crested helmet of the Zamorian royal guard. A shield and a spear lay near him, and it took but an instant's examination to show that he had been strangled. The barbarian glanced about uneasily. He knew that this man must be the guard he had heard pass his hiding-place by the wall. Only a short time had passed, yet in that interval nameless hands had reached out of the dark and choked out the soldier's life.

Straining his eyes in the gloom, he saw a hint of motion through the shrubs near the wall. Thither he glided, gripping his sword. He made no more noise than a panther stealing through the night, yet the man he was stalking heard. The Cimmerian had a dim glimpse of a huge bulk close to the wall, felt relief that it was at least human; then the fellow wheeled quickly with a gasp that sounded like panic, made the first motion of a forward plunge, hands clutching, then recoiled as the Cimmerian's blade caught the starlight. For a tense instant neither spoke, standing ready for anything.

“You are no soldier,” hissed the stranger at last. “You are a thief like myself.”

“And who are you?” asked the Cimmerian in a suspicious whisper.

“Taurus of Nemedia.”

The Cimmerian lowered his sword.

“I’ve heard of you. Men call you a prince of thieves.”

A low laugh answered him. Taurus was tall as the Cimmerian, and heavier; he was big-bellied and fat, but his every movement betokened a subtle dynamic magnetism, which was reflected in the keen eyes that glinted vitally, even in the starlight. He was barefooted and carried a coil of what looked like a thin, strong rope, knotted at regular intervals.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

“Conan, a Cimmerian,” answered the other. “I came seeking a way to steal Yara’s jewel, that men call the Elephant’s Heart.”

Conan sensed the man’s great belly shaking in laughter, but it was not derisive.

“By Bel, god of thieves!” hissed Taurus. “I had thought only myself had courage to attempt *that* poaching. These Zamorians call themselves thieves – bah! Conan, I like your grit. I never shared an adventure with any one, but by Bel, we’ll attempt this together if you’re willing.”

“Then you are after the gem, too?”

“What else? I’ve had my plans laid for months, but you, I think, have acted on a sudden impulse, my friend.”

“You killed the soldier?”

“Of course. I slid over the wall when he was on the other side of the garden. I hid in the bushes; he heard me, or thought he heard something. When he came blundering over, it was no trick at all to get behind him and suddenly grip his neck and choke out his fool’s life. He was like most men, half blind in the dark. A good thief should have eyes like a cat.”

“You made one mistake,” said Conan.

Taurus’ eyes flashed angrily.

“I? I, a mistake? Impossible!”

“You should have dragged the body into the bushes.”

“Said the novice to the master of the art. They will not change the guard until past midnight. Should any come searching for him now, and find his body, they would flee at once to Yara, bellowing the news, and give us time to escape. Were they not to find it, they’d go beating up the bushes and catch us like rats in a trap.”

“You are right,” agreed Conan.

“So. Now attend. We waste time in this cursed discussion. There are no guards in the inner garden – human guards, I mean, though there are sentinels even more deadly. It was their presence which baffled me for so long, but I finally discovered a way to circumvent them.”

“What of the soldiers in the lower part of the tower?”

“Old Yara dwells in the chambers above. By that route we will come – and go, I hope. Never mind asking me how. I have arranged a way. We’ll steal down through the top of the tower and strangle old Yara before he can cast any of his accursed spells on us. At least we’ll try; it’s the chance of being turned into a spider or a toad, against the wealth and power of the world. All good thieves must know how to take risks.”

“I’ll go as far as any man,” said Conan, slipping off his sandals.

“Then follow me.” And turning, Taurus leaped up, caught the wall and drew himself up. The man’s suppleness was amazing, considering his bulk; he seemed almost to glide up over the edge of the coping. Conan followed him, and lying flat on the broad top, they spoke in wary whispers.

“I see no light,” Conan muttered. The lower part of the tower seemed much like that portion visible from outside the garden – a perfect, gleaming cylinder, with no apparent openings.

“There are cleverly constructed doors and windows,” answered Taurus, “but they are closed. The soldiers breathe air that comes from above.”

The garden was a vague pool of shadows, where feathery bushes and low spreading trees waved darkly in the starlight. Conan’s wary soul felt the aura of waiting menace that brooded over it. He felt the burning glare of unseen eyes, and he caught a subtle scent that

made the short hairs on his neck instinctively bristle as a hunting dog bristles at the scent of an ancient enemy.

"Follow me," whispered Taurus, "keep behind me, as you value your life."

Taking what looked like a copper tube from his girdle, the Nemedian dropped lightly to the sward inside the wall. Conan was close behind him, sword ready, but Taurus pushed him back, close to the wall, and showed no inclination to advance, himself. His whole attitude was of tense expectancy, and his gaze, like Conan's, was fixed on the shadowy mass of shrubbery a few yards away. This shrubbery was shaken, although the breeze had died down. Then two great eyes blazed from the waving shadows, and behind them other sparks of fire glinted in the darkness. "Lions!" muttered Conan.

"Aye. By day they are kept in subterranean caverns below the tower. That's why there are no guards in this garden."

Conan counted the eyes rapidly.

"Five in sight; maybe more back in the bushes. They'll charge in a moment –"

"Be silent!" hissed Taurus, and he moved out from the wall, cautiously as if treading on razors, lifting the slender tube. Low rumblings rose from the shadows and the blazing eyes moved forward. Conan could sense the great slavering jaws, the tufted tails lashing tawny sides. The air grew tense – the Cimmerian gripped his sword, expecting the charge and the irresistible hurtling of giant bodies. Then Taurus brought the mouth of the tube to his lips and blew powerfully. A long jet of yellowish powder shot from the other end of the tube and billowed out instantly in a thick green-yellow cloud that settled over the shrubbery, blotting out the glaring eyes.

Taurus ran back hastily to the wall. Conan glared without understanding. The thick cloud hid the shrubbery, and from it no sound came.

"What is that mist?" the Cimmerian asked uneasily.

“Death!” hissed the Nemedian. “If a wind springs up and blows it back upon us, we must flee over the wall. But no, the wind is still, and now it is dissipating. Wait until it vanishes entirely. To breathe it is death.”

Presently only yellowish shreds hung ghostlily in the air; then they were gone, and Taurus motioned his companion forward. They stole toward the bushes, and Conan gasped. Stretched out in the shadows lay five great tawny shapes, the fire of their grim eyes dimmed for ever. A sweetish cloying scent lingered in the atmosphere.

“They died without a sound!” muttered the Cimmerian. “Taurus, what was that powder?”

“It was made from the black lotus, whose blossoms wave in the lost jungles of Khitai, where only the yellow-skulled priests of Yun dwell. Those blossoms strike dead any who smell of them.”

Conan knelt beside the great forms, assuring himself that they were indeed beyond power of harm. He shook his head; the magic of the exotic lands was mysterious and terrible to the barbarians of the north.

“Why can you not slay the soldiers in the tower in the same way?” he asked.

“Because that was all the powder I possessed. The obtaining of it was a feat which in itself was enough to make me famous among the thieves of the world. I stole it out of a caravan bound for Stygia, and I lifted it, in its cloth-of-gold bag, out of the coils of the great serpent which guarded it, without awaking him. But come, in Bel’s name! Are we to waste the night in discussion?”

They glided through the shrubbery to the gleaming foot of the tower, and there, with a motion enjoining silence, Taurus unwound his knotted cord, on one end of which was a strong steel hook. Conan saw his plan, and asked no questions as the Nemedian gripped the line a short distance below the hook, and began to swing it about his head. Conan laid his ear to the smooth wall and listened, but could hear nothing. Evidently the soldiers within did not suspect the presence of intruders, who had made no more sound than the night wind blowing through the trees. But a strange

nervousness was on the barbarian; perhaps it was the lion-smell which was over everything.

Taurus threw the line with a smooth, ripping motion of his mighty arm. The hook curved upward and inward in a peculiar manner, hard to describe, and vanished over the jeweled rim. It apparently caught firmly, for cautious jerking and then hard pulling did not result in any slipping or giving. “Luck the first cast,” murmured Taurus. “I–”

It was Conan’s savage instinct which made him wheel suddenly; for the death that was upon them made no sound. A fleeting glimpse showed the Cimmerian the giant tawny shape, rearing upright against the stars, towering over him for the death-stroke. No civilized man could have moved half so quickly as the barbarian moved. His sword flashed frostily in the starlight with every ounce of desperate nerve and thew behind it, and man and beast went down together.

Cursing incoherently beneath his breath, Taurus bent above the mass, and saw his companion’s limbs move as he strove to drag himself from under the great weight that lay limply upon him. A glance showed the startled Nemedian that the lion was dead, its slanting skull split in half. He laid hold of the carcass, and by his aid, Conan thrust it aside and clambered up, still gripping his dripping sword.

“Are you hurt, man?” gasped Taurus, still bewildered by the stunning swiftness of that touch-and-go episode.

“No, by Crom!” answered the barbarian. “But that was as close a call as I’ve had in a life noways tame. Why did not the cursed beast roar as he charged?”

“All things are strange in this garden,” said Taurus. “The lions strike silently – and so do other deaths. But come – little sound was made in that slaying, but the soldiers might have heard, if they are not asleep or drunk. That beast was in some other part of the garden and escaped the death of the flowers, but surely there are no more. We must climb this cord – little need to ask a Cimmerian if he can.”

“If it will bear my weight,” grunted Conan, cleansing his sword on the grass.

“It will bear thrice my own,” answered Taurus. “It was woven from the tresses of dead women, which I took from their tombs at midnight, and steeped in the deadly wine of the upas tree, to give it strength. I will go first – then follow me closely.”

The Nemedian gripped the rope and crooking a knee about it, began the ascent; he went up like a cat, belying the apparent clumsiness of his bulk. The Cimmerian followed. The cord swayed and turned on itself, but the climbers were not hindered; both had made more difficult climbs before. The jeweled rim glittered high above them, jutting out from the perpendicular of the wall, so that the cord hung perhaps a foot from the side of the tower – a fact which added greatly to the ease of the ascent.

Up and up they went, silently, the lights of the city spreading out further and further to their sight as they climbed, the stars above them more and more dimmed by the glitter of the jewels along the rim. Now Taurus reached up a hand and gripped the rim itself, pulling himself up and over. Conan paused a moment on the very edge, fascinated by the great frosty jewels whose gleams dazzled his eyes – diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, set thick as stars in the shimmering silver. At a distance their different gleams had seemed to merge into a pulsing white glare; but now, at close range, they shimmered with a million rainbow tints and lights, hypnotizing him with their scintillations.

“There is a fabulous fortune here, Taurus,” he whispered; but the Nemedian answered impatiently, “Come on! If we secure the Heart, these and all other things shall be ours.”

Conan climbed over the sparkling rim. The level of the tower’s top was some feet below the gemmed ledge. It was flat, composed of some dark blue substance, set with gold that caught the starlight, so that the whole looked like a wide sapphire flecked with shining gold-dust. Across from the point where they had entered there seemed to be a sort of chamber, built upon the roof. It was of the same silvery material as the walls of the tower, adorned with

designs worked in smaller gems; its single door was of gold, its surface cut in scales, and crusted with jewels that gleamed like ice.

Conan cast a glance at the pulsing ocean of lights which spread far below them, then glanced at Taurus. The Nemedian was drawing up his cord and coiling it. He showed Conan where the hook had caught – a fraction of an inch of the point had sunk under a great blazing jewel on the inner side of the rim.

"Luck was with us again," he muttered. "One would think that our combined weight would have torn that stone out. Follow me; the real risks of the venture begin now. We are in the serpent's lair, and we know not where he lies hidden."

———

Like stalking tigers they crept across the darkly gleaming floor and halted outside the sparkling door. With a deft and cautious hand Taurus tried it. It gave without resistance, and the companions looked in, tensed for anything. Over the Nemedian's shoulder Conan had a glimpse of a glittering chamber, the walls, ceiling and floor of which were crusted with great white jewels which lighted it brightly, and which seemed its only illumination. It seemed empty of life.

"Before we cut off our last retreat," hissed Taurus, "go you to the rim and look over on all sides; if you see any soldiers moving in the gardens, or anything suspicious, return and tell me. I will await you within this chamber."

Conan saw scant reason in this, and a faint suspicion of his companion touched his wary soul, but he did as Taurus requested. As he turned away, the Nemedian slipt inside the door and drew it shut behind him. Conan crept about the rim of the tower, returning to his starting-point without having seen any suspicious movement in the vaguely waving sea of leaves below. He turned toward the door – suddenly from within the chamber there sounded a strangled cry.

The Cimmerian leaped forward, electrified – the gleaming door swung open and Taurus stood framed in the cold blaze behind him. He swayed and his lips parted, but only a dry rattle burst from his throat. Catching at the golden door for support, he lurched out upon the roof, then fell headlong, clutching at his throat. The door swung to behind him.

Conan, crouching like a panther at bay, saw nothing in the room behind the stricken Nemedian, in the brief instant the door was partly open – unless it was not a trick of the light which made it seem as if a shadow darted across the gleaming floor. Nothing followed Taurus out on the roof, and Conan bent above the man.

The Nemedian stared up with dilated, glazing eyes, that somehow held a terrible bewilderment. His hands clawed at his throat, his lips slobbered and gurgled; then suddenly he stiffened, and the astounded Cimmerian knew that he was dead. And he felt that Taurus had died without knowing what manner of death had stricken him. Conan glared bewilderedly at the cryptic golden door. In that empty room, with its glittering jeweled walls, death had come to the prince of thieves as swiftly and mysteriously as he had dealt doom to the lions in the gardens below.

Gingerly the barbarian ran his hands over the man's half-naked body, seeking a wound. But the only marks of violence were between his shoulders, high up near the base of his bull-neck – three small wounds, which looked as if three nails had been driven deep in the flesh and withdrawn. The edges of these wounds were black, and a faint smell as of putrefaction was evident. Poisoned darts? thought Conan – but in that case the missiles should be still in the wounds.

Cautiously he stole toward the golden door, pushed it open, and looked inside. The chamber lay empty, bathed in the cold, pulsing glow of the myriad jewels. In the very center of the ceiling he idly noted a curious design – a black eight-sided pattern, in the center of which four gems glittered with a red flame unlike the white blaze of the other jewels. Across the room there was another door, like the one in which he stood, except that it was not carved in the scale

pattern. Was it from that door that death had come? – and having struck down its victim, had it retreated by the same way?

Closing the door behind him, the Cimmerian advanced into the chamber. His bare feet made no sound on the crystal floor. There were no chairs or tables in the chamber, only three or four silken couches, embroidered with gold and worked in strange serpentine designs, and several silver-bound mahogany chests. Some were sealed with heavy golden locks; others lay open, their carven lids thrown back, revealing heaps of jewels in a careless riot of splendor to the Cimmerian's astounded eyes. Conan swore beneath his breath; already he had looked upon more wealth that night than he had ever dreamed existed in all the world, and he grew dizzy thinking of what must be the value of the jewel he sought.

He was in the center of the room now, going stooped forward, head thrust out warily, sword advanced, when again death struck at him soundlessly. A flying shadow that swept across the gleaming floor was his only warning, and his instinctive sidelong leap all that saved his life. He had a flashing glimpse of a hairy black horror that swung past him with a clashing of frothing fangs, and something splashed on his bare shoulder that burned like drops of liquid hell-fire. Springing back, sword high, he saw the horror strike the floor, wheel and scuttle toward him with appalling speed – a gigantic black spider, such as men see only in nightmare dreams.

It was as large as a pig, and its eight thick hairy legs drove its ogreish body over the floor at headlong pace; its four evilly gleaming eyes shone with a horrible intelligence, and its fangs dripped venom that Conan knew, from the burning of his shoulder where only a few drops had splashed as the thing struck and missed, was laden with swift death. This was the killer that had dropped from its perch in the middle of the ceiling on a strand of its web, on the neck of the Nemedian. Fools that they were not to have suspected that the upper chambers would be guarded as well as the lower!

These thoughts flashed briefly through Conan's mind as the monster rushed. He leaped high, and it passed beneath him, wheeled and charged back. This time he evaded its rush with a sidewise leap, and struck back like a cat. His sword severed one of the hairy legs, and again he barely saved himself as the monstrosity swerved at him, fangs clicking fiendishly. But the creature did not press the pursuit; turning, it scuttled across the crystal floor and ran up the wall to the ceiling, where it crouched for an instant, glaring down at him with its fiendish red eyes. Then without warning it launched itself through space, trailing a strand of slimy grayish stuff.

Conan stepped back to avoid the hurtling body – then ducked frantically, just in time to escape being snared by the flying web-rope. He saw the monster's intent and sprang toward the door, but it was quicker, and a sticky strand cast across the door made him a

prisoner. He dared not try to cut it with his sword; he knew the stuff would cling to the blade, and before he could shake it loose, the fiend would be sinking its fangs into his back.

Then began a desperate game, the wits and quickness of the man matched against the fiendish craft and speed of the giant spider. It no longer scuttled across the floor in a direct charge, or swung its body through the air at him. It raced about the ceiling and the walls, seeking to snare him in the long loops of sticky gray web-strands, which it flung with a devilish accuracy. These strands were thick as ropes, and Conan knew that once they were coiled about him, his desperate strength would not be enough to tear him free before the monster struck.

All over the chamber went on that devil's dance, in utter silence except for the quick breathing of the man, the low scuff of his bare feet on the shining floor, the castanet rattle of the monstrosity's fangs. The gray strands lay in coils on the floor; they were looped along the walls; they overlaid the jewel-chests and silken couches, and hung in dusky festoons from the jeweled ceiling. Conan's steel-trap quickness of eye and muscle had kept him untouched, though the sticky loops had passed him so close they rasped his naked hide. He knew he could not always avoid them; he not only had to watch the strands swinging from the ceiling, but to keep his eye on the floor, lest he trip in the coils that lay there. Sooner or later a gummy loop would writhe about him, python-like, and then, wrapped like a cocoon, he would lie at the monster's mercy.

The spider raced across the chamber floor, the gray rope waving out behind it. Conan leaped high, clearing a couch – with a quick wheel the fiend ran up the wall, and the strand, leaping off the floor like a live thing, whipped about the Cimmerian's ankle. He caught himself on his hands as he fell, jerking frantically at the web which held him like a pliant vise, or the coil of a python. The hairy devil was racing down the wall to complete its capture. Stung to frenzy, Conan caught up a jewel chest and hurled it with all his strength. It was a move the monster was not expecting. Full in the midst of the branching black legs the massive missile struck, smashing against the wall with a muffled sickening crunch. Blood and greenish slime

spattered, and the shattered mass fell with the burst gem-chest to the floor. The crushed black body lay among the flaming riot of jewels that spilled over it; the hairy legs moved aimlessly, the dying eyes glittered redly among the twinkling gems.

Conan glared about, but no other horror appeared, and he set himself to working free of the web. The substance clung tenaciously to his ankle and his hands, but at last he was free, and taking up his sword, he picked his way among the gray coils and loops to the inner door. What horrors lay within he did not know. The Cimmerian's blood was up, and since he had come so far, and overcome so much peril, he was determined to go through to the grim finish of the adventure, whatever that might be. And he felt that the jewel he sought was not among the many so carelessly strewn about the gleaming chamber.

Stripping off the loops that fouled the inner door, he found that it, like the other, was not locked. He wondered if the soldiers below were still unaware of his presence. Well, he was high above their heads, and if tales were to be believed, they were used to strange noises in the tower above them – sinister sounds, and screams of agony and horror.

Yara was on his mind, and he was not altogether comfortable as he opened the golden door. But he saw only a flight of silver steps leading down, dimly lighted by what means he could not ascertain. Down these he went silently, gripping his sword. He heard no sound, and came presently to an ivory door, set with blood stones. He listened, but no sound came from within; only thin wisps of smoke drifted lazily from beneath the door, bearing a curious exotic odor unfamiliar to the Cimmerian. Below him the silver stair wound down to vanish in the dimness, and up that shadowy well no sound floated; he had an eery feeling that he was alone in a tower occupied only by ghosts and phantoms.

III

Cautiously he pressed against the ivory door and it swung silently inward. On the shimmering threshold Conan stared like a wolf in

strange surroundings, ready to fight or flee on the instant. He was looking into a large chamber with a domed golden ceiling; the walls were of green jade, the floor of ivory, partly covered by thick rugs. Smoke and exotic scent of incense floated up from a brazier on a golden tripod, and behind it sat an idol on a sort of marble couch. Conan stared aghast; the image had the body of a man, naked, and green in color; but the head was one of nightmare and madness. Too large for the human body, it had no attributes of humanity. Conan stared at the wide flaring ears, the curling proboscis, on either side of which stood white tusks tipped with round golden balls. The eyes were closed, as if in sleep.

This then, was the reason for the name, the Tower of the Elephant, for the head of the thing was much like that of the beasts described by the Shemitish wanderer. This was Yara's god; where then should the gem be, but concealed in the idol, since the stone was called the Elephant's Heart?

As Conan came forward, his eyes fixed on the motionless idol, the eyes of the thing opened suddenly! The Cimmerian froze in his tracks. It was no image – it was a living thing, and he was trapped in its chamber!

That he did not instantly explode in a burst of murderous frenzy is a fact that measures his horror, which paralyzed him where he stood. A civilized man in his position would have sought doubtful refuge in the conclusion that he was insane; it did not occur to the Cimmerian to doubt his senses. He knew he was face to face with a demon of the Elder World, and the realization robbed him of all his faculties except sight.

The trunk of the horror was lifted and quested about, the topaz eyes stared unseeingly, and Conan knew the monster was blind. With the thought came a thawing of his frozen nerves, and he began to back silently toward the door. But the creature heard. The sensitive trunk stretched toward him, and Conan's horror froze him again when the being spoke, in a strange, stammering voice that never changed its key or timbre. The Cimmerian knew that those jaws were never built or intended for human speech.

“Who is here? Have you come to torture me again, Yara? Will you never be done? Oh, Yag-kosha, is there no end to agony?”

Tears rolled from the sightless eyes, and Conan’s gaze strayed to the limbs stretched on the marble couch. And he knew the monster would not rise to attack him. He knew the marks of the rack, and the searing brand of the flame, and tough-souled as he was, he stood aghast at the ruined deformities which his reason told him had once been limbs as comely as his own. And suddenly all fear and repulsion went from him, to be replaced by a great pity. What this monster was, Conan could not know, but the evidences of its sufferings were so terrible and pathetic that a strange aching sadness came over the Cimmerian, he knew not why. He only felt that he was looking upon a cosmic tragedy, and he shrank with shame, as if the guilt of a whole race were laid upon him.

“I am not Yara,” he said. “I am only a thief. I will not harm you.”

“Come near that I may touch you,” the creature faltered, and Conan came near unfearingly, his sword hanging forgotten in his hand. The sensitive trunk came out and groped over his face and shoulders, as a blind man gropes, and its touch was light as a girl’s hand.

“You are not of Yara’s race of devils,” sighed the creature. “The clean, lean fierceness of the wastelands marks you. I know your people from of old, whom I knew by another name in the long, long ago when another world lifted its jeweled spires to the stars. There is blood on your fingers.”

“A spider in the chamber above and a lion in the garden,” muttered Conan.

“You have slain a man too, this night,” answered the other. “And there is death in the tower above. I feel; I know.”

“Aye,” muttered Conan. “The prince of all thieves lies there dead from the bite of a vermin.”

“So – and so!” the strange inhuman voice rose in a sort of low chant. “A slaying in the tavern and a slaying on the roof – I know; I feel. And the third will make the magic of which not even Yara dreams – oh, magic of deliverance, green gods of Yag!”

Again tears fell as the tortured body was rocked to and fro in the grip of varied emotions. Conan looked on, bewildered.

Then the convulsions ceased; the soft, sightless eyes were turned toward the Cimmerian, the trunk beckoned.

“Oh man, listen,” said the strange being. “I am foul and monstrous to you, am I not? Nay, do not answer; I know. But you would seem as strange to me, could I see you. There are many worlds besides this earth, and life takes many shapes. I am neither god nor demon, but flesh and blood like yourself, though the substance differ in part, and the form be cast in different mold.

“I am very old, oh man of the waste countries; long and long ago I came to this planet with others of my world, from the green planet Yag, which circles for ever in the outer fringe of this universe. We swept through space on mighty wings that drove us through the cosmos quicker than light, because we had warred with the kings of Yag and were defeated and outcast. But we could never return, for on earth our wings withered from our shoulders. Here we abode apart from earthly life. We fought the strange and terrible forms of life which then walked the earth, so that we became feared, and were not molested in the dim jungles of the east, where we had our abode.

“We saw men grow from the ape and build the shining cities of Valusia, Kamelia, Commoria, and their sisters. We saw them reel before the thrusts of the heathen Atlanteans and Picts and Lemurians. We saw the oceans rise and engulf Atlantis and Lemuria, and the isles of the Picts, and the shining cities of civilization. We saw the survivors of Pictdom and Atlantis build their stone age empires, and go down to ruin, locked in bloody wars. We saw the Picts sink into abysmal savagery, the Atlanteans into apedom again. We saw new savages drift southward in conquering waves from the arctic circle to build a new civilization, with new kingdoms called Nemedia, and Koth, and Aquilonia and their sisters. We saw your people rise under a new name from the jungles of the apes that had been Atlanteans. We saw the descendants of the Lemurians who had survived the cataclysm, rise again through savagery and ride westward, as Hyrkanians. And we saw this race of devils, survivors

of the ancient civilization that was before Atlantis sank, come once more into culture and power – this accursed kingdom of Zamora.

"All this we saw, neither aiding nor hindering the immutable cosmic law, and one by one we died; for we of Yag are not immortal, though our lives are as the lives of planets and constellations. At last I alone was left, dreaming of old times among the ruined temples of jungle-lost Khitai, worshipped as a god by an ancient yellow-skinned race. Then came Yara, versed in dark knowledge handed down through the days of barbarism, since before Atlantis sank.

"First he sat at my feet and learned wisdom. But he was not satisfied with what I taught him, for it was white magic, and he wished evil lore, to enslave kings and glut a fiendish ambition. I would teach him none of the black secrets I had gained, through no wish of mine, through the eons.

"But his wisdom was deeper than I had guessed; with guile gotten among the dusky tombs of dark Stygia, he trapped me into divulging a secret I had not intended to bare; and turning my own power upon me, he enslaved me. Ah, gods of Yag, my cup has been bitter since that hour!

"He brought me up from the lost jungles of Khitai where the gray apes danced to the pipes of the yellow priests, and offerings of fruit and wine heaped my broken altars. No more was I a god to kindly jungle-folk – I was slave to a devil in human form."

Again tears stole from the unseeing eyes.

"He pent me in this tower which at his command I built for him in a single night. By fire and rack he mastered me, and by strange unearthly tortures you would not understand. In agony I would long ago have taken my own life, if I could. But he kept me alive – mangled, blinded, and broken – to do his foul bidding. And for three hundred years I have done his bidding, from this marble couch, blackening my soul with cosmic sins, and staining my wisdom with crimes, because I had no other choice. Yet not all my ancient secrets has he wrested from me, and my last gift shall be the sorcery of the Blood and the Jewel.

“For I feel the end of time draw near. You are the hand of Fate. I beg of you, take the gem you will find on yonder altar.”

Conan turned to the gold and ivory altar indicated, and took up a great round jewel, clear as crimson crystal; and he knew that this was the Heart of the Elephant.

“Now for the great magic, the mighty magic, such as earth has not seen before, and shall not see again, through a million million of millenniums. By my life-blood I conjure it, by blood born on the green breast of Yag, dreaming far-poised in the great blue vastness of Space.

“Take your sword, man, and cut out my heart; then squeeze it so that the blood will flow over the red stone. Then go you down these stairs and enter the ebony chamber where Yara sits wrapped in lotus-dreams of evil. Speak his name and he will awaken. Then lay this gem before him, and say, ‘Yag-kosha gives you a last gift and a last enchantment.’ Then get you from the tower quickly; fear not, your way shall be made clear. The life of man is not the life of Yag, nor is human death the death of Yag. Let me be free of this cage of broken blind flesh, and I will once more be Yogah of Yag, morning-crowned and shining, with wings to fly, and feet to dance, and eyes to see, and hands to break.”

Uncertainly Conan approached, and Yag-kosha, or Yogah, as if sensing his uncertainty, indicated where he should strike. Conan set his teeth and drove the sword deep. Blood streamed over the blade and his hand, and the monster started convulsively, then lay back quite still. Sure that life had fled, at least life as he understood it, Conan set to work on his grisly task and quickly brought forth something that he felt must be the strange being’s heart, though it differed curiously from any he had ever seen. Holding the still pulsing organ over the blazing jewel, he pressed it with both hands, and a rain of blood fell on the stone. To his surprize, it did not run off, but soaked into the gem, as water is absorbed by a sponge.

Holding the jewel gingerly, he went out of the fantastic chamber and came upon the silver steps. He did not look back; he instinctively felt that some sort of transmutation was taking place in

the body on the marble couch, and he further felt that it was of a sort not to be witnessed by human eyes.

He closed the ivory door behind him and without hesitation descended the silver steps. It did not occur to him to ignore the instructions given him. He halted at an ebony door, in the center of which was a grinning silver skull, and pushed it open. He looked into a chamber of ebony and jet, and saw, on a black silken couch, a tall, spare form reclining. Yara the priest and sorcerer lay before him, his eyes open and dilated with the fumes of the yellow lotus, far-staring, as if fixed on gulfs and nighted abysses beyond human ken.

"Yara!" said Conan, like a judge pronouncing doom. "Awaken!"

The eyes cleared instantly and became cold and cruel as a vulture's. The tall silken-clad form lifted erect, and towered gauntly above the Cimmerian.

"Dog!" His hiss was like the voice of a cobra. "What do you here?"

Conan laid the jewel on the great ebony table.

"He who sent this gem bade me say, 'Yag-kosha gives a last gift and a last enchantment.' "

Yara recoiled, his dark face ashy. The jewel was no longer crystal-clear; its murky depths pulsed and throbbed, and curious smoky waves of changing color passed over its smooth surface. As if drawn hypnotically, Yara bent over the table and gripped the gem in his hands, staring into its shadowed depths, as if it were a magnet to draw the shuddering soul from his body. And as Conan looked, he thought that his eyes must be playing him tricks. For when Yara had risen up from his couch, the priest had seemed gigantically tall; yet now he saw that Yara's head would scarcely come to his shoulder. He blinked, puzzled, and for the first time that night, doubted his own senses. Then with a shock he realized that the priest was shrinking in stature – was growing smaller before his very gaze.

With a detached feeling he watched, as a man might watch a play; immersed in a feeling of overpowering unreality, the Cimmerian

was no longer sure of his own identity; he only knew that he was looking upon the external evidences of the unseen play of vast Outer forces, beyond his understanding.

Now Yara was no bigger than a child; now like an infant he sprawled on the table, still grasping the jewel. And now the sorcerer suddenly realized his fate, and he sprang up, releasing the gem. But still he dwindled, and Conan saw a tiny, pigmy figure rushing wildly about the ebony table-top, waving tiny arms and shrieking in a voice that was like the squeak of an insect.

Now he had shrunk until the great jewel towered above him like a hill, and Conan saw him cover his eyes with his hands, as if to shield them from the glare, as he staggered about like a madman. Conan sensed that some unseen magnetic force was pulling Yara to the gem. Thrice he raced wildly about it in a narrowing circle, thrice he strove to turn and run out across the table; then with a scream that echoed faintly in the ears of the watcher, the priest threw up his arms and ran straight toward the blazing globe.

Bending close, Conan saw Yara clamber up the smooth, curving surface, impossibly, like a man climbing a glass mountain. Now the priest stood on the top, still with tossing arms, invoking what grisly names only the gods know. And suddenly he sank into the very heart of the jewel, as a man sinks into a sea, and Conan saw the smoky waves close over his head. Now he saw him in the crimson heart of the jewel, once more crystal-clear, as a man sees a scene far away, tiny with great distance. And into the heart came a green, shining winged figure with the body of a man and the head of an elephant – no longer blind or crippled. Yara threw up his arms and fled as a madman flees, and on his heels came the avenger. Then, like the bursting of a bubble, the great jewel vanished in a rainbow burst of iridescent gleams, and the ebony table-top lay bare and deserted – as bare, Conan somehow knew, as the marble couch in the chamber above, where the body of that strange transcosmic being called Yag-kosha and Yogah had lain.

The Cimmerian turned and fled from the chamber, down the silver stairs. So mazed was he that it did not occur to him to escape from the tower by the way he had entered it. Down that winding,

shadowy silver well he ran, and came into a large chamber at the foot of the gleaming stairs. There he halted for an instant; he had come into the room of the soldiers. He saw the glitter of their silver corselets, the sheen of their jeweled sword-hilts. They sat slumped at the banquet board, their dusky plumes waving somberly above their drooping helmeted heads; they lay among their dice and fallen goblets on the wine-stained lapis-lazuli floor. And he knew that they were dead. The promise had been made, the word kept; whether sorcery or magic or the falling shadow of great green wings had stilled the revelry, Conan could not know, but his way had been made clear. And a silver door stood open, framed in the whiteness of dawn.

Into the waving green gardens came the Cimmerian, and as the dawn wind blew upon him with the cool fragrance of luxuriant growths, he started like a man waking from a dream. He turned back uncertainly, to stare at the cryptic tower he had just left. Was he bewitched and enchanted? Had he dreamed all that had seemed to have passed? As he looked he saw the gleaming tower sway against the crimson dawn, its jewel-crusted rim sparkling in the growing light, and crash into shining shards.

OceanofPDF.com

Which Will Scarcely Be Understood

Small poets sing of little, foolish things,
As more befitting to a shallow brain
That dreams not of pre-Atlantean kings,
Nor launches on that dark uncharted Main
That holds grim islands and unholy tides,
Where many a black mysterious secret hides.

True rime concerns her not with bursting buds,
The chirping bird, the lifting of the rose –
Save ebon blooms that swell in ghastly woods,
And that grim, voiceless bird that ever broods
Where through black boughs a wind of horror blows.

Oh, little singers, what know you of those
Ungodly, slimy shapes that glide and crawl
Out of unreckoned gulfs when midnights fall,
To haunt a poet's slumbering, and close
Against his eyes thrust up their hissing head,
And mock him with their eyes so serpent-red?

Conceived and bred in blackened pits of hell,
The poems come that set the stars on fire;
Born of black maggots writhing in a shell
Men call a poet's skull – an iron bell
Filled up with burning mist and golden mire.

The royal purple is a moldy shroud;
The laurel crown is cypress fixed with thorns;
The sword of fame, a sickle notched and dull;
The face of beauty is a grinning skull;
And ever in *their* souls' red caverns loud
The rattle of cloven hoofs and horns.

The poets know that justice is a lie,
That good and light are baubles filled with dust –
This world's slave-market where swine sell and buy,

This shambles where the howling cattle die,
Has blinded not their eyes with lies and lust.

Ring up the demons from the lower Pit,
Since Evil conquers goodness in the end;
Break down the Door and let the fires be lit,
And greet each slavering monster as a friend.

Let obscene shapes of Darkness ride the earth,
Let sacrificial smokes blot out the skies,
Let dying virgins glut the Black Gods' eyes,
And all the world resound with noisome mirth.

Break down the altars, let the streets run red,
Tramp down the race into the crawling slime;
Then where red Chaos lifts her serpent head,
The Fiend be praised, we'll pen the perfect rime.

OceanofPDF.com

Wings in the Night

I

The Horror on the Stake

Solomon Kane leaned on his strangely carved staff and gazed in scowling perplexity at the mystery which spread silently before him. Many a deserted village Kane had seen in the months that had passed since he turned his face east from the Slave Coast and lost himself in the mazes of jungle and river, but never one like this. It was not famine that had driven away the inhabitants, for yonder the wild rice still grew rank and unkempt in the untilled fields. There were no Arab slave-raiders in this nameless land – it must have been a tribal war that devastated the village, Kane decided, as he gazed somberly at the scattered bones and grinning skulls that littered the space among the rank weeds and grasses. These bones were shattered and splintered and Kane saw jackals and a hyena furtively slinking among the ruined huts. But why had the slayers left the spoils? There lay war spears, their shafts crumbling before the attacks of the white ants. There lay shields, moldering in the rains and sun. There lay the cooking-pots, and about the neck-bones of a shattered skeleton glistened a necklace of gaudily painted pebbles and shells – surely rare loot for any savage conqueror.

He gazed at the huts, wondering why the thatch roofs of so many were torn and rent, as if by taloned things seeking entrance. Then something made his cold eyes narrow in startled unbelief. Just outside the moldering mound that was once the village wall towered a gigantic baobab tree, branchless for sixty feet, its mighty bole too large to be gripped and scaled. Yet in the topmost branches dangled a skeleton, apparently impaled on a broken limb. The cold hand of mystery touched the shoulder of Solomon Kane. How came those pitiful remains in that tree? Had some monstrous ogre's inhuman hand flung them there?

Kane shrugged his broad shoulders and his hand unconsciously touched the black butts of his heavy pistols, the hilt of his long rapier, and the dirk in his belt. Kane felt no fear as an ordinary man

would feel, confronted with the Unknown and Nameless. Years of wandering in strange lands and warring with strange creatures had melted away from brain, soul and body all that was not steel and whalebone. He was tall and spare, almost gaunt, built with the savage economy of the wolf. Broad-shouldered, long-armed, with nerves of ice and thews of spring steel, he was no less the natural killer than the born swordsman.

The brambles and thorns of the jungle had dealt hardly with him; his garments hung in tatters, his featherless slouch hat was torn and his boots of Cordovan leather were scratched and worn. The sun had baked his chest and limbs to a deep bronze but his ascetically lean face was impervious to its rays. His complexion was still of that strange dark pallor which gave him an almost corpse-like appearance, belied only by his cold, light eyes.

And now Kane, sweeping the village once more with his searching gaze, pulled his belt into a more comfortable position, shifted to his left hand the cat-headed stave N'Longa had given him, and took up his way again.

To the west lay a strip of thin forest, sloping downward to a broad belt of savannas, a waving sea of grass waist-deep and deeper. Beyond that rose another narrow strip of woodlands, deepening rapidly into dense jungle. Out of that jungle Kane had fled like a hunted wolf with pointed-toothed men hot on his trail. Even now a vagrant breeze brought faintly the throb of a savage drum which whispered its obscene tale of hate and blood-hunger and belly-lust across miles of jungle and grassland.

The memory of his flight and narrow escape was vivid in Kane's mind, for only the day before had he realized too late that he was in cannibal country, and all that afternoon in the reeking stench of the thick jungle, he had crept and run and hidden and doubled and twisted on his track with the fierce hunters ever close behind him, until night fell and he gained and crossed the grasslands under cover of darkness. Now in the late morning he had seen nothing, heard nothing of his pursuers, yet he had no reason to believe that they had abandoned the chase. They had been close on his heels when he took to the savannas.

So Kane surveyed the land in front of him. To the east, curving from north to south ran a straggling range of hills, for the most part dry and barren, rising in the south to a jagged black skyline that reminded Kane of the black hills of Negari. Between him and these hills stretched a broad expanse of gently rolling country, thickly treed, but nowhere approaching the density of a jungle. Kane got the impression of a vast upland plateau, bounded by the curving hills to the east and by the savannas to the west.

Kane set out for the hills with his long, swinging, tireless stride. Surely somewhere behind him the black demons were stealing after him, and he had no desire to be driven to bay. A shot might send them flying in sudden terror, but on the other hand, so low they were in the scale of humanity, it might transmit no supernatural fear to their dull brains. And not even Solomon Kane, whom Sir Francis Drake had called Devon's king of swords, could win in a pitched battle with a whole tribe.

The silent village with its burden of death and mystery faded out behind him. Utter silence reigned among these mysterious uplands where no birds sang and only a silent macaw flitted among the great trees. The only sounds were Kane's cat-like tread, and the whisper of the drum-haunted breeze.

And then Kane caught a glimpse among the trees that made his heart leap with a sudden, nameless horror, and a few moments later he stood before Horror itself, stark and grisly. In a wide clearing, on a rather bold incline stood a grim stake, and to this stake was bound a thing that had once been a black man. Kane had rowed, chained to the bench of a Turkish galley, and he had toiled in Barbary vineyards; he had battled red Indians in the New Lands and had languished in the dungeons of Spain's Inquisition. He knew much of the fiendishness of man's inhumanity, but now he shuddered and grew sick. Yet it was not so much the ghastliness of the mutilations, horrible as they were, that shook Kane's soul, but the knowledge that the wretch still lived.

For as he drew near, the gory head that lolled on the butchered breast lifted and tossed from side to side, splattering blood from the

stumps of ears, while a bestial, rattling whimper drooled from the shredded lips.

Kane spoke to the ghastly thing and it screamed unbearably, writhing in incredible contortions, while its head jerked up and down with the jerking of mangled nerves, and the empty, gaping eye-sockets seemed striving to see from their emptiness. And moaning low and brain-shatteringly it huddled its outraged self against the stake where it was bound and lifted its head in a grisly attitude of listening, as if it expected something out of the skies.

"Listen," said Kane, in the dialect of the river-tribes. "Do not fear me – I will not harm you and nothing else shall harm you any more. I am going to loose you."

Even as he spoke Kane was bitterly aware of the emptiness of his words. But his voice had filtered dimly into the crumbling, agony-shot brain of the black man. From between splintered teeth fell words, faltering and uncertain, mixed and mingled with the slavering droolings of imbecility. He spoke a language akin to the dialects Kane had learned from friendly river-folk on his wanderings, and Kane gathered that he had been bound to the stake for a long time – many moons, he whimpered in the delirium of approaching death; and all this time, inhuman, evil things had worked their monstrous will upon him. These things he mentioned by name, but Kane could make nothing of it for he used an unfamiliar term that sounded like akaana. But these things had not bound him to the stake, for the torn wretch slavered the name of Goru, who was a priest and who had drawn a cord too tight about his legs – and Kane wondered that the memory of this small pain should linger through the red mazes of agony that the dying man should whimper over it.

And to Kane's horror, the black spoke of his brother who had aided in the binding of him, and he wept with infantile sobs, and moisture formed in the empty sockets and made tears of blood. And he muttered of a spear broken long ago in some dim hunt, and while he muttered in his delirium, Kane gently cut his bonds and eased his broken body to the grass. But even at the Englishman's careful touch, the poor wretch writhed and howled like a dying dog, while

blood started anew from a score of ghastly gashes, which, Kane noted, were more like the wounds made by fang and talon than by knife or spear. But at last it was done and the bloody, torn thing lay on the soft grass with Kane's old slouch hat beneath its death's-head, breathing in great, rattling gasps.

Kane poured water from his canteen between the mangled lips, and bending close, said: "Tell me more of these devils, for by the God of my people, this deed shall not go unavenged, though Satan himself bar my way."

It is doubtful if the dying man heard. But he heard something else. The macaw, with the curiosity of its breed, swept from a near-by grove and passed so close its great wings fanned Kane's hair. And at the sound of those wings, the butchered black man heaved upright and screamed in a voice that haunted Kane's dreams to the day of his death: "The wings! The wings! They come again! Ahhh, mercy, the wings!"

And the blood burst in a torrent from his lips and so he died.

Kane rose and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. The upland forest shimmered in the noonday heat. Silence lay over the land like an enchantment of dreams. Kane's brooding eyes ranged to the black, malevolent hills crouching in the distance and back to the far-away savannas. An ancient curse lay over that mysterious land and the shadow of it fell across the soul of Solomon Kane.

Tenderly he lifted the red ruin that had once pulsed with life and youth and vitality, and carried it to the edge of the glade, where arranging the cold limbs as best he might, and shuddering once again at the unnamable mutilations, he piled stones above it till even a prowling jackal would find it hard to get at the flesh below.

And he had scarcely finished when something jerked him back out of his somber broodings to a realization of his own position. A slight sound – or his own wolf-like instinct – made him whirl. On the other side of the glade he caught a movement among the tall grasses – the glimpse of a hideous black face, with an ivory ring in the flat nose, thick lips parted to reveal teeth whose filed points were apparent even at that distance, beady eyes and a low slanting forehead topped by a mop of frizzly hair. Even as the face faded

from view Kane leaped back into the shelter of the ring of trees which circled the glade, and ran like a deer-hound, flitting from tree to tree and expecting each moment to hear the exultant clamor of the braves and to see them break cover at his back.

But soon he decided that they were content to hunt him down as certain beasts track their prey, slowly and inevitably. He hastened through the upland forest, taking advantage of every bit of cover, and he saw no more of his pursuers; yet he knew, as a hunted wolf knows, that they hovered close behind him, waiting their moment to strike him down without risk to their own hides. Kane smiled bleakly and without mirth. If it was to be a test of endurance, he would see how savage thews compared with his own spring-steel resilience. Let night come and he might yet give them the slip. If not – Kane knew in his heart that the savage essence of the Anglo-Saxon which chafed at his flight, would make him soon turn at bay, though his pursuers outnumbered him a hundred to one.

The sun sank westward. Kane was hungry, for he had not eaten since early morning when he wolfed down the last of his dried meat. An occasional spring had given him water, and once he thought he glimpsed the roof of a large hut far away through the trees. But he gave it a wide berth. It was hard to believe that this silent plateau was inhabited, but if it were, the natives were doubtless as ferocious as those hunting him. Ahead of him the land grew rougher, with broken boulders and steep slopes as he neared the lower reaches of the brooding hills. And still no sight of his hunters except for faint glimpses caught by wary backward glances – a drifting shadow, the bending of the grass, the sudden straightening of a trodden twig, a rustle of leaves. Why should they be so cautious? Why did they not close in and have it over?

Night fell and Kane reached the first long slopes which led upward to the foot of the hills which now brooded black and menacing above him. They were his goal, where he hoped to shake off his persistent foes at last, yet a nameless aversion warned him away from them. They were pregnant with hidden evil, repellent as the coil of a great sleeping serpent, glimpsed in the tall grass.

Darkness fell heavily. The stars winked redly in the thick heat of the tropic night. And Kane, halting for a moment in an unusually dense grove, beyond which the trees thinned out on the slopes, heard a stealthy movement that was not the night wind – for no breath of air stirred the heavy leaves. And even as he turned, there was a rush in the dark, under the trees. A shadow that merged with the shadows flung itself on Kane with a bestial mouthing and a rattle of iron, and the Englishman, parrying by the gleam of the stars on the weapon, felt his assailant duck into close quarters and meet him chest to chest. Lean wiry arms locked about him, pointed teeth gnashed at him as Kane returned the fierce grapple. His tattered shirt ripped beneath a jagged edge, and by blind chance Kane found and pinioned the hand that held the iron knife, and drew his own dirk, flesh crawling in anticipation of a spear in the back.

But even as the Englishman wondered why the others did not come to their comrade's aid, he threw all of his iron muscles into the single combat. Close-clinched they swayed and writhed in the darkness, each striving to drive his blade into the other's flesh, and as the superior strength of the white man began to assert itself, the cannibal howled like a rabid dog, tore and bit. A convulsive spin-wheel of effort pivoted them out into the starlit glade where Kane saw the ivory nose-ring and the pointed teeth that snapped beast-like at his throat. And simultaneously he forced back and down the hand that gripped his knife-wrist, and drove the dirk deep into the black ribs. The warrior screamed and the raw acrid scent of blood flooded the night air. And in that instant Kane was stunned by a sudden savage rush and beat of mighty wings that dashed him to earth, and the black man was torn from his grip and vanished with a scream of mortal agony. Kane leaped to his feet, shaken to his foundation. The dwindling scream of the wretched black sounded faintly and from above him.

Straining his eyes into the skies he thought he caught a glimpse of a shapeless and horrific Thing crossing the dim stars – in which the writhing limbs of a human mingled namelessly with great wings and a shadowy shape – but so quickly it was gone, he could not be sure.

And now he wondered if it were not all a nightmare. But groping in the grove he found the ju-ju stave with which he had parried the short stabbing spear that lay beside it. And here, if more proof was needed, was his long dirk, still stained with blood.

Wings! Wings in the night! The skeleton in the village of torn roofs – the mutilated black man whose wounds were not made with knife or spear and who died shrieking of wings. Surely those hills were the haunt of gigantic birds who made humanity their prey. Yet if birds, why had they not wholly devoured the black man on the stake? And Kane knew in his heart that no true bird ever cast such a shadow as he had seen flit across the stars.

He shrugged his shoulders, bewildered. The night was silent. Where were the rest of the cannibals who had followed him from their distant jungle? Had the fate of their comrade frightened them into flight? Kane looked to his pistols. Cannibals or no, he went not up into those dark hills that night.

Now he must sleep, if all the devils of the Elder World were on his track. A deep roaring to the westward warned him that beasts of prey were a-roam, and he walked rapidly down the rolling slopes until he came to a dense grove some distance from that in which he had fought the cannibal. He climbed high among the great branches until he found a thick crotch that would accommodate even his tall frame. The branches above would guard him from a sudden swoop of any winged thing, and if savages were lurking near, their clamber into the tree would warn him, for he slept lightly as a cat. As for serpents and leopards, they were chances he had taken a thousand times.

Solomon Kane slept and his dreams were vague, chaotic, haunted with a suggestion of pre-human evil and which at last merged into a vision vivid as a scene in waking life. Solomon dreamed he woke with a start, drawing a pistol – for so long had his life been that of the wolf, that reaching for a weapon was his natural reaction upon waking suddenly. And his dream was that a strange, shadowy thing had perched upon a great branch close by and gazed at him with greedy, luminous yellow eyes that seared into his brain. The dream-thing was tall and lean and strangely misshapen, so blended with

the shadows that it seemed a shadow itself, tangible only in the narrow yellow eyes. And Kane dreamed he waited, spellbound, while uncertainty came into those eyes and then the creature walked out on the limb as a man would walk, raised great shadowy wings, sprang into space and vanished. Then Kane jerked upright, the mists of sleep fading.

In the dim starlight, under the arching Gothic-like branches, the tree was empty save for himself. Then it had been a dream, after all – yet it had been so vivid, so fraught with inhuman foulness – even now a faint scent like that exuded by birds of prey seemed to linger in the air. Kane strained his ears. He heard the sighing of the night-wind, the whisper of the leaves, the far-away roaring of a lion, but naught else. Again Solomon slept – while high above him a shadow wheeled against the stars, circling again and again as a vulture circles a dying wolf.

II

The Battle in the Sky

Dawn was spreading whitely over the eastern hills when Kane woke. The thought of his nightmare came to him and he wondered again at its vividness as he climbed down out of the tree. A near-by spring slaked his thirst and some fruit, rare in these highlands, eased his hunger.

Then he turned his face again to the hills. A finish fighter was Solomon Kane. Along that grim skyline dwelt some evil foe to the sons of men, and that mere fact was as much a challenge to the Puritan as had ever been a glove thrown in his face by some hot-headed gallant of Devon.

Refreshed by his night's sleep, he set out with his long easy stride, passing the grove that had witnessed the battle in the night, and coming into the region where the trees thinned at the foot of the slopes. Up these slopes he went, halting for a moment to gaze back over the way he had come. Now that he was above the plateau, he could easily make out a village in the distance – a cluster of mud-and-bamboo huts with one unusually large hut a short distance from

the rest on a sort of low knoll. And while he gazed, with a sudden rush of grisly wings the terror was upon him! Kane whirled, galvanized. All signs had pointed to the theory of a winged thing that hunted by night. He had not expected attack in broad daylight – but here a bat-like monster was swooping at him out of the very eye of the rising sun. Kane saw a spread of mighty wings, from which glared a horribly human face; then he drew and fired with unerring aim and the monster veered wildly in midair and came whirling and tumbling out of the sky to crash at his feet.

Kane leaned forward, pistol smoking in his hand, and gazed wide-eyed. Surely this thing was a demon out of the pits of hell, said the somber mind of the Puritan; yet a leaden ball had slain it. Kane

shrugged his shoulders, baffled; he had never seen aught to approach this, though all his life had fallen in strange ways.

The thing was like a man, inhumanly tall and inhumanly thin; the head was long, narrow and hairless – the head of a predatory creature. The ears were small, close-set and queerly pointed. The eyes, set in death, were narrow, oblique and of a strange yellowish color. The nose was thin and hooked, like the beak of a bird of prey, the mouth a wide cruel gash, whose thin lips, writhed in a death snarl and flecked with foam, disclosed wolfish fangs.

The creature, which was naked and hairless, was not unlike a human being in other ways. The shoulders were broad and powerful, the neck long and lean. The arms were long and muscular, the thumb being set beside the fingers after the manner of the great apes. Fingers and thumbs were armed with heavy hooked talons. The chest was curiously misshapen, the breastbone jutting out like the keel of a ship, the ribs curving back from it. The legs were long and wiry with huge, hand-like prehensile feet, the great toe set opposite the rest like a man's thumb. The claws on the toes were merely long nails.

But the most curious feature of this curious creature was on its back. A pair of great wings, shaped much like the wings of a moth but with a bony frame and of leathery substance, grew from its shoulders, beginning at a point just back and above where the arms joined the shoulders, and extending halfway to the narrow hips. These wings, Kane reckoned, would measure some eighteen feet from tip to tip.

He laid hold on the creature, involuntarily shuddering at the slick, hard leather-like feel of the skin, and half lifted it. The weight was little more than half as much as it would have been in a man the same height – some six and a half feet. Evidently the bones were of a peculiar bird-like structure and the flesh consisted almost entirely of stringy muscles.

Kane stepped back, surveying the thing again. Then his dream had been no dream after all – that foul thing or another like it had in grisly reality lighted in the tree beside him – a whir of mighty wings! A sudden rush through the sky! Even as Kane whirled he

realized he had committed the jungle-farer's unpardonable crime – he had allowed his astonishment and curiosity to throw him off guard. Already a winged fiend was at his throat and there was no time to draw and fire his other pistol. Kane saw, in a maze of thrashing wings, a devilish, semi-human face – he felt those wings battering at him – he felt cruel talons sink deep into his breast; then he was dragged off his feet and felt empty space beneath him.

The winged man had wrapped his limbs about the Englishman's legs, and the talons he had driven into Kane's breast muscles held like fanged vises. The wolf-like fangs drove at Kane's throat but the Puritan gripped the bony throat and thrust back the grisly head, while with his right hand he strove to draw his dirk. The bird-man was mounting slowly and a fleeting glance showed Kane that they were already high above the trees. The Englishman did not hope to survive this battle in the sky, for even if he slew his foe, he would be dashed to death in the fall. But with the innate ferocity of the fighting Anglo-Saxon he set himself grimly to take his captor with him.

Holding those keen fangs at bay, Kane managed to draw his dirk and he plunged it deep into the body of the monster. The bat-man veered wildly and a rasping, raucous screech burst from his half-throttled throat. He floundered wildly, beating frantically with his great wings, bowing his back and twisting his head fiercely in a vain effort to free it and sink home his deadly fangs. He sank the talons of one hand agonizingly deeper and deeper into Kane's breast muscles, while with the other he tore at his foe's head and body. But the Englishman, gashed and bleeding, with the silent and tenacious savagery of a bulldog sank his fingers deeper into the lean neck and drove his dirk home again and again, while far below awed eyes watched the fiendish battle that was raging at that dizzy height.

They had drifted out over the plateau, and the fast-weakening wings of the bat-man barely supported their weight. They were sinking earthward swiftly, but Kane, blinded with blood and battle fury, knew nothing of this. With a great piece of his scalp hanging loose, his chest and shoulders cut and ripped, the world had become a blind, red thing in which he was aware of but one sensation – the

bulldog urge to kill his foe. Now the feeble and spasmodic beating of the dying monster's wings held them hovering for an instant above a thick grove of gigantic trees, while Kane felt the grip of claws and twining limbs grow weaker and the slashing of the talons become a futile flailing.

With a last burst of power he drove the reddened dirk straight through the breast-bone and felt a convulsive tremor run through the creature's frame. The great wings fell limp – and the victor and vanquished dropped headlong and plummet-like earthward.

Through a red wave Kane saw the waving branches rushing up to meet them – he felt them flail his face and tear at his clothing, as still locked in that death-clinch he rushed downward through leaves which eluded his vainly grasping hand; then his head crashed against a great limb and an endless abyss of blackness engulfed him.

III

The People in the Shadow

Through colossal, black basaltic corridors of night, Solomon Kane fled for a thousand years. Gigantic winged demons, horrific in the utter darkness, swept over him with a rush of great bat-like pinions and in the blackness he fought with them as a cornered rat fights a vampire-bat, while fleshless jaws drooled fearful blasphemies and horrid secrets in his ears, and the skulls of men rolled under his groping feet.

Solomon Kane came back suddenly from the land of delirium and his first sight of sanity was that of a fat, kindly black face bending over him. Kane saw he was in a roomy, clean and well-ventilated hut, while from a cooking-pot bubbling outside wafted savory scents. Kane realized he was ravenously hungry. And he was strangely weak, and the hand he lifted to his bandaged head shook and its bronze was dimmed.

The fat man and another, a tall, gaunt, grim-faced warrior, bent over him, and the fat man said: "He is awake, Kuroba, and of sound mind." The gaunt man nodded and called something which was answered from without.

“What is this place?” asked Kane, in a language he had learned, akin to the dialect the black had used. “How long have I lain here?”

“This is the last village of Bogonda.” The fat black pressed him back with hands gentle as a woman’s. “We found you lying beneath the trees on the slopes, badly wounded and senseless. You have raved in delirium for many days. Now eat.”

A lithe young warrior entered with a wooden bowl full of steaming food and Kane ate ravenously.

“He is like a leopard, Kuroba,” said the fat man admiringly. “Not one in a thousand would have lived with his wounds.”

“Aye,” returned the other. “And he slew the akaana that rent him, Goru.”

Kane struggled to his elbows. “Goru?” he cried fiercely. “The priest who binds men to stakes for devils to eat?”

And he strove to rise so that he could strangle the fat man, but his weakness swept over him like a wave, the hut swam dizzily to his eyes and he sank back panting, where he soon fell into a sound, natural sleep.

Later he awoke and found a slim young girl, named Nayela, watching him. She fed him, and feeling much stronger, Kane asked questions which she answered shyly but intelligently. This was Bogonda, ruled by Kuroba the chief and Goru the priest. None in Bogonda had ever seen or heard of a white man before. She counted the days Kane had lain helpless, and he was amazed. But such a battle as he had been through was enough to kill an ordinary man. He wondered that no bones had been broken, but the girl said the branches had broken his fall and he had landed on the body of the akaana. He asked for Goru, and the fat priest came to him, bringing Kane’s weapons.

“Some we found with you where you lay,” said Goru, “some by the body of the akaana you slew with the weapon which speaks in fire and smoke. You must be a god – yet the gods bleed not and you have just all but died. Who are you?”

“I am no god,” Kane answered, “but a man like yourself, albeit my skin be white. I come from a far land amid the sea, which land, mind ye, is the fairest and noblest of all lands. My name is Solomon

Kane and I am a landless wanderer. From the lips of a dying man I first heard your name. Yet your face seemeth kindly."

A shadow crossed the eyes of the shaman and he hung his head.

"Rest and grow strong, oh man, or god or whatever you be," said he, "and in time you will learn of the ancient curse that rests upon this ancient land."

And in the days that followed, while Kane recovered and grew strong with the wild beast vitality that was his, Goru and Kuroba sat and spoke to him at length, telling him many curious things.

Their tribe was not aboriginal here, but had come upon the plateau a hundred and fifty years before, giving it the name of their former home. They had once been a powerful tribe in Old Bogonda, on a great river far to the south. But tribal wars broke their power, and at last before a concerted uprising, the whole tribe gave way, and Goru repeated legends of that great flight of a thousand miles through jungle and swampland harried at every step by cruel foes.

At last, hacking their way through a country of ferocious cannibals, they found themselves safe from man's attack – but prisoners in a trap from which neither they nor their descendants could ever escape. They were in the horror-country of Akaana, and Goru said his ancestors came to understand the jeering laughter of the man-eaters who had hounded them to the very borders of the plateau.

The Bogondi found a fertile country with good water and plenty of game. There were numbers of goats and a species of wild pig that throve here in great abundance. At first the people ate these pigs, but later they spared them for a very good reason. The grasslands between plateau and jungle swarmed with antelopes, buffaloes and the like, and there were many lions. Lions also roamed the plateau, but Bogonda meant "Lion-slayer" in their tongue and it was not many moons before the remnants of the great cats took to the lower levels. But it was not lions they had to fear, as Goru's ancestors soon learned.

Finding that the cannibals would not come past the savannas, they rested from their long trek and built two villages – Upper and Lower Bogonda. Kane was in Upper Bogonda; he had seen the ruins

of the lower village. But soon they found that they had strayed into a country of nightmares with dripping fangs and talons. They heard the beat of mighty wings at night, and saw horrific shadows cross the stars and loom against the moon. Children began to disappear and at last a young hunter strayed off into the hills, where night overtook him. And in the gray light of dawn a mangled, half-devoured corpse fell from the skies into the village street and a whisper of ogreish laughter from high above froze the horrified onlookers. Then a little later the full horror of their position burst upon the Bogondi.

At first the winged men were afraid of the black people. They hid themselves and ventured from their caverns only at night. Then they grew bolder. In the full daylight, a warrior shot one with an arrow, but the fiends had learned they could slay a human and its death scream brought a score of the devils dropping from the skies, who tore the slayer to pieces in full sight of the tribe.

The Bogondi then prepared to leave that devil's country and a hundred warriors went up into the hills to find a pass. They found steep walls, up which a man must climb laboriously, and they found the cliffs honeycombed with caves where the winged men dwelt.

Then was fought the first pitched battle between men and bat-men and it resulted in a crushing victory for the monsters. The bows and spears of the black people proved futile before the swoops of the taloned fiends, and of all that hundred that went up into the hills, not one survived; for the akaanas hunted down those that fled and dragged down the last one within bowshot of the upper village.

Then it was that the Bogondi, seeing they could not hope to win through the hills, sought to fight their way out again the way they had come.

But a great horde of cannibals met them in the grasslands and in a great battle that lasted nearly all day, hurled them back, broken and defeated. And Goru said while the battle raged, the skies were thronged with hideous shapes, circling above and laughing their fearful mirth to see men die wholesale.

So the survivors of those two battles, licking their wounds, bowed to the inevitable with the fatalistic philosophy of the black man. Some fifteen hundred men, women and children remained, and they built their huts, tilled the soil and lived stolidly in the shadow of the nightmare.

In those days there were many of the bird-people, and they might have wiped out the Bogondi utterly, had they wished. No one warrior could cope with an akaana, for he was stronger than a human, he struck as a hawk strikes, and if he missed, his wings carried him out of reach of a counterblow. Here Kane interrupted to

ask why the blacks did not make war on the demons with arrows. But Goru answered that it took a quick and accurate archer to strike an akaana in midair at all and so tough were their hides that unless the arrow struck squarely it would not penetrate. Kane knew that the blacks were very indifferent bowmen and that they pointed their shafts with chipped stone, bone or hammered iron almost as soft as copper; he thought of Poitiers and Agincourt and wished grimly for a file of stout English archers – or a rank of musketeers.

But Goru said the akaanas did not seem to wish to destroy the Bogondi utterly. Their chief food consisted of the little pigs which then swarmed the plateau, and young goats. Sometimes they went out on the savannas for antelope, but they distrusted the open country and feared the lions. Nor did they haunt the jungles beyond, for the trees grew too close for the spread of their wings. They kept to the hills and the plateau – and what lay beyond those hills none in Bogonda knew.

The akaanas allowed the black folk to inhabit the plateau much as men allow wild animals to thrive, or stock lakes with fish – for their own pleasure. The bat-people, said Goru, had a strange and grisly sense of humor which was tickled by the sufferings of a howling human. Those grim hills had echoed to cries that turned men's hearts to ice.

But for many years, Goru said, once the Bogondi learned not to resist their masters, the akaanas were content to snatch up a baby from time to time, or devour a young girl strayed from the village or a youth whom night caught outside the walls. The bat-folk distrusted the village; they circled high above it but did not venture within. There the Bogondi were safe until late years.

Goru said that the akaanas were fast dying out; once there had been hope that the remnants of his race would outlast them – in which event, he said fatalistically, the cannibals would undoubtedly come up from the jungle and put the survivors in the cooking-pots. Now he doubted if there were more than a hundred and fifty akaanas altogether. Kane asked him why did not the warriors then sally forth on a great hunt and destroy the devils utterly, and Goru smiled a bitter smile and repeated his remarks about the prowess of

the bat-people in battle. Moreover, said he, the whole tribe of Bogonda numbered only about four hundred souls now, and the bat-people were their only protection against the cannibals to the west.

Goru said the tribe had thinned more in the past thirty years than in all the years previous. As the numbers of the akaanas dwindled, their hellish savagery increased. They seized more and more of the Bogondi to torture and devour in their grim black caves high up in the hills, and Goru spoke of sudden raids on hunting-parties and toilers in the plantain fields and of the nights made ghastly by horrible screams and gibberings from the dark hills, and blood-freezing laughter that was half human; of dismembered limbs and gory grinning heads flung from the skies to fall in the shuddering village, and of grisly feasts among the stars.

Then came drouth, Goru said, and a great famine. Many of the springs dried up and the crops of rice and yams and plantains failed. The gnus, deer and buffaloes which had formed the main part of Bogonda's meat diet withdrew to the jungle in quest of water, and the lions, their hunger overcoming their fear of man, ranged into the uplands. Many of the tribe died, and the rest were driven by hunger to eat the pigs which were the natural prey of the bat-people. This angered the akaanas and thinned the pigs. Famine, Bogondi and the lions destroyed all the goats and half the pigs.

At last the famine was past, but the damage was done. Of all the great droves which once swarmed the plateau, only a remnant was left and these were wary and hard to catch. The Bogondi had eaten the pigs, so the akaanas ate the Bogondi. Life became a hell for the black people, and the lower village, numbering now only some hundred and fifty souls, rose in revolt. Driven to frenzy by repeated outrages, they turned on their masters. An akaana lighting in the very streets to steal a child was set on and shot to death with arrows. And the people of Lower Bogonda drew into their huts and waited for their doom.

And in the night, said Goru, it came. The akaanas had overcome their distrust of the huts. The full flock of them swarmed down from the hills, and Upper Bogonda awoke to hear the fearful cataclysm of screams and blasphemies that marked the end of the other village.

All night Goru's people had lain sweating in terror, not daring to move, harkening to the howling and gibbering that rent the night; at last these sounds ceased, Goru said, wiping the cold sweat from his brow, but sounds of grisly and obscene feasting still haunted the night with demon's mockery.

In the early dawn Goru's people saw the hell-flock winging back to their hills, like demons flying back to hell through the dawn, and they flew slowly and heavily, like gorged vultures. Later the people dared to steal down to the accursed village, and what they found there sent them shrieking away; and to that day, Goru said, no man passed within three bowshots of that silent horror. And Kane nodded in understanding, his cold eyes more somber than ever.

For many days after that, Goru said, the people waited in quaking fear, and finally in desperation of fear, which breeds unspeakable cruelty, the tribe cast lots and the loser was bound to a stake between the two villages, in hopes that the akaanas would recognize this as a token of submission so that the people of Bogonda might escape the fate of their kinsmen. This custom, said Goru, had been borrowed from the cannibals who in old times worshipped the akaanas and offered a human sacrifice at each moon. But chance had shown them that the akaana could be killed, so they ceased to worship him – at least that was Goru's deduction, and he explained at much length that no mortal thing is worthy of real adoration, however evil or powerful it may be.

His own ancestors had made occasional sacrifices to placate the winged devils, but until lately it had not been a regular custom. Now it was necessary; the akaanas expected it, and each moon they chose from their waning numbers a strong young man or a girl whom they bound to the stake. Kane watched Goru's face closely as he spoke of his sorrow for this unspeakable necessity, and the Englishman realized the priest was sincere. Kane shuddered at the thought of a tribe of human beings thus passing slowly but surely into the maws of a race of monsters.

Kane spoke of the wretch he had seen, and Goru nodded, pain in his soft eyes. For a day and a night he had been hanging there, while the akaanas glutted their vile torture-lust on his quivering, agonized flesh. Thus far the sacrifices had kept doom from the village. The remaining pigs furnished sustenance for the dwindling akaanas, together with an occasional baby snatched up, and they were content to have their nameless sport with the single victim each moon.

A thought came to Kane.

"The cannibals never come up into the plateau?"

Goru shook his head; safe in their jungle, they never raided past the savannas.

"But they hunted me to the very foot of the hills."

Again Goru shook his head. There was only one cannibal; they had found his footprints. Evidently a single warrior, bolder than the rest, had allowed his passion for the chase to overcome his fear of the grisly plateau and had paid the penalty. Kane's teeth came together with a vicious snap which ordinarily took the place of profanity with him. He was stung by the thought of fleeing so long from a single enemy. No wonder that enemy had followed so cautiously, waiting until dark to attack. But, asked Kane, why had the akaana seized the black man instead of himself – and why had he not been attacked by the bat-man who alighted in his tree that night?

The cannibal was bleeding, Goru answered; the scent called the bat-fiend to attack, for they scented raw blood as far as vultures. And they were very wary. They had never seen a man like Kane, who showed no fear. Surely they had decided to spy on him, take him off guard before they struck.

Who were these creatures? Kane asked. Goru shrugged his shoulders. They were there when his ancestors came, who had never heard of them before they saw them. There was no intercourse with the cannibals, so they could learn nothing from them. The akaanas lived in caves, naked like beasts; they knew nothing of fire and ate only fresh raw meat. But they had a language of a sort and acknowledged a king among them. Many died in the great famine

when the stronger ate the weaker. They were vanishing swiftly; of late years no females or young had been observed among them. When these males died at last, there would be no more akaanas; but Bogonda, observed Goru, was doomed already, unless – he looked strangely and wistfully at Kane. But the Puritan was deep in thought.

Among the swarm of native legends he had heard on his wanderings, one now stood out. Long, long ago, an old, old ju-ju man had told him, winged devils came flying out of the north and passed over his country, vanishing in the maze of the jungle-haunted south. And the ju-ju man related an old, old legend concerning these creatures – that once they had abode in myriad numbers far on a great lake of bitter water many moons to the north, and ages and ages ago a chieftain and his warriors fought them with bows and arrows and slew many, driving the rest into the south. The name of the chief was N'Yasunna and he owned a great war canoe with many oars driving it swiftly through the bitter water.

And now a cold wind blew suddenly on Solomon Kane, as if from a Door opened suddenly on Outer Gulfs of Time and Space. For now he realized the truth of that garbled myth, and the truth of an older, grimmer legend. For what was the great bitter lake but the Mediterranean Ocean and who was the chief N'Yasunna but the hero Jason, who conquered the harpies and drove them – not alone into the Strophades Isles but into Africa as well? The old pagan tale was true then, Kane thought dizzily, shrinking aghast from the strange realm of grisly possibilities this opened up. For if this myth of the harpies were a reality, what of the other legends – the Hydra, the centaurs, the chimera, Medusa, Pan and the satyrs? All those myths of antiquity – behind them did there lie and lurk nightmare realities with slavering fangs and talons steeped in shuddersome evil? Africa, the Dark Continent, land of shadows and horror, of bewitchment and sorcery, into which all evil things had been banished before the growing light of the western world!

Kane came out of his reveries with a start. Goru was tugging gently and timidly at his sleeve.

“Save us from the akaanas!” said Goru. “If you be not a god, there is the power of a god in you! You bear in your hand the mighty ju-ju stave which has in times gone by been the scepter of fallen empires and the staff of mighty priests. And you have weapons which speak death in fire and smoke – for our young men watched and saw you slay two akaanas. We will make you king – god – what you will! More than a moon has passed since you came into Bogonda and the time for the sacrifice is gone by, but the bloody stake stands bare. The akaanas shun the village where you lie; they steal no more babes from us. We have thrown off their yoke because our trust is in you!”

Kane clasped his temples with his hands. “You know not what you ask!” he cried. “God knoweth it is in my deepest heart to rid the land of this evil, but I am no god. With my pistols I can slay a few of the fiends, but I have but little powder left. Had I great store of powder and ball, and the musket I shattered in the vampire-haunted Hills of the Dead, then indeed would there be a rare hunting. But even if I slew all those fiends, what of the cannibals?”

“They too will fear you!” cried old Kuroba, while the girl Nayela and the lad, Loga, who was to have been the next sacrifice, gazed at him with their souls in their eyes. Kane dropped his chin on his fist and sighed.

“Yet will I stay here in Bogonda all the rest of my life if ye think I be protection to the people.”

So Solomon Kane stayed at the village of Bogonda of the Shadow. The people were a kindly folk, whose natural sprightliness and fun-loving spirits were subdued and saddened by long dwelling in the Shadow. But now they had taken new heart by the white man’s coming and it wrenched Kane’s heart to note the pathetic trust they placed in him. Now they sang in the plantain fields and danced about the fires, and gazed at him with adoring faith in their eyes. But Kane, cursing his own helplessness, knew how futile would be his fancied protection if the winged fiends swept suddenly out of the skies.

But he stayed in Bogonda. In his dreams the gulls wheeled above the cliffs of old Devon carved in the clean, blue, wind-whipped

skies, and in the day the call of the unknown lands beyond Bogonda clawed at his heart with fierce yearning. But he abode in Bogonda and racked his brains for a plan. He sat and gazed for hours at the ju-ju stave, hoping in desperation that black magic would aid him, where the white man's mind failed. But N'Longa's ancient gift gave him no aid. Once he had summoned the Slave Coast shaman to him across leagues of intervening space – but it was only when confronted with supernatural manifestations that N'Longa could come to him, and these harpies were not supernatural.

The germ of an idea began to grow at the back of Kane's mind, but he discarded it. It had to do with a great trap – and how could the akaanas be trapped? The roaring of lions played a grim accompaniment to his brooding meditations. As man dwindled on the plateau, the hunting beasts who feared only the spears of the hunters were beginning to gather. Kane laughed bitterly. It was not lions, that might be hunted down and slain singly, that he had to deal with.

At some little distance from the village stood the great hut of Goru, once a council hall. This hut was full of many strange fetishes which, Goru said with a helpless wave of his fat hands, were strong magic against evil spirits but scant protection against winged hellions of gristle and bone and flesh.

IV

The Madness of Solomon

Kane woke suddenly from a dreamless sleep. A hideous medley of screams burst horrific in his ears. Outside his hut, people were dying in the night, horribly, as cattle die in the shambles. He had slept, as always, with his weapons buckled on him. Now he bounded to the door, and something fell mouthing and slavering at his feet to grasp his knees in a convulsive grip and gibber incoherent pleas. In the faint light of a smoldering fire nearby, Kane in horror recognized the face of the youth Loga, now frightfully torn and drenched in blood, already freezing into a death mask. The night was full of fearful sounds, inhuman howlings mingled with the whisper of

mighty wings, the tearing of thatch and a ghastly demon-laughter. Kane freed himself from the locked dead arms and sprang to the dying fire. He could make out only a confused and vague maze of fleeing forms, and darting shapes, the shift and blur of dark wings against the stars.

He snatched up a brand and thrust it against the thatch of his hut – and as the flame leaped up and showed him the scene he stood frozen and aghast. Red, howling doom had fallen on Bogonda. Winged monsters raced screaming through her streets, wheeled above the heads of the fleeing people, or tore apart the hut thatches to get at the gibbering victims within.

With a choked cry the Englishman woke from his trance of horror, drew and fired at a darting flame-eyed shadow which fell at his feet with a shattered skull. And Kane gave tongue to one deep, fierce roar and bounded into the mêlée, all the berserk fury of his heathen Saxon ancestors bursting into terrible being.

Dazed and bewildered by the sudden attack, cowed by long years of submission, the Bogondi were incapable of combined resistance and for the most part died like sheep. Some, maddened by desperation, fought back, but their arrows went wild or glanced from the tough wings while the devilish agility of the creatures made spear-thrust and ax-stroke uncertain. Leaping from the ground

they avoided the blows of their victims and sweeping down upon their shoulders dashed them to earth, where fang and talon did their crimson work.

Kane saw old Kuroba, gaunt and blood-stained, at bay against a hut wall with his foot on the neck of a monster who had not been quick enough. The grim-faced old chief wielded a two-handed ax in great sweeping blows that for the moment held back the screeching onset of half a dozen of the devils. Kane was leaping to his aid when a low, pitiful whimper checked him.

The girl Nayela writhed weakly, prone in the bloody dust, while on her back a vulture-like thing crouched and tore. Her dulling eyes sought the face of the Englishman in anguished appeal. Kane ripped out a bitter oath and fired point-blank. The winged devil pitched backward with an abhorrent screeching and a wild flutter of dying wings and Kane bent to the dying girl, who whimpered and kissed his hands with uncertain lips as he cradled her head in his arms. Her eyes set.

Kane laid the body gently down, looking for Kuroba. He saw only a huddled cluster of grisly shapes that sucked and tore at something between them. And Kane went mad. With a scream that cut through the inferno he bounded up, slaying even as he rose. Even in the act of lunging up from bent knee he drew and thrust, transfixing a vulture-like throat. Then whipping out his rapier as the thing floundered and twitched in its death struggles, the raging Puritan charged forward seeking new victims.

On all sides of him the people of Bogonda were dying hideously. They fought futilely or they fled and the demons coursed them down as a hawk courses a hare. They ran into the huts and the fiends rent the thatch or burst the door, and what took place in those huts was mercifully hidden from Kane's eyes. And to the frantic white man's horror-distorted brain it seemed that he alone was responsible. The black folk had trusted him to save them. They had withheld the sacrifice and defied their grim masters and now they were paying the horrible penalty and he was unable to save them. In the agony-dimmed eyes turned toward him Kane quaffed the black dregs of the bitter cup. It was not anger or vindictiveness

of fear. It was hurt and a stunned reproach. He was their god and he had failed them.

Now he ravened through the massacre and the fiends avoided him, turning to the easy black victims. But Kane was not to be denied. In a red haze that was not of the burning hut, he saw a culminating horror; a harpy gripped a writhing naked thing that had been a woman and the wolfish fangs gorged deep. As Kane sprang, thrusting, the bat-man dropped his yammering, mowing prey and soared aloft. But Kane dropped his rapier and with the bound of a blood-mad panther caught the demon's throat and locked his iron legs about its lower body.

Again he found himself battling in midair, but this time only above the roofs of the huts. Terror had entered the cold brain of the harpy. He did not fight to hold and slay; he wished only to be rid of this silent, clinging thing that stabbed so savagely for his life. He floundered wildly, screaming abhorrently and thrashing with his wings, then as Kane's dirk bit deeper, dipped suddenly sidewise and fell headlong.

The thatch of a hut broke their fall, and Kane and the dying harpy crashed through to land on a writhing mass on the hut floor. In the lurid flickering of the burning hut outside that vaguely lighted the hut into which he had fallen, Kane saw a deed of brain-shaking horror being enacted – red dripping fangs in a yawning gash of a mouth, and a crimson travesty of a human form that still writhed with agonized life. Then in the maze of madness that held him, his steel fingers closed on the fiend's throat in a grip that no tearing of talons or hammering of wings could loosen, until he felt the horrid life flow out from under his fingers and the bony neck hung broken.

And still outside the red madness of slaughter continued. Kane bounded up, his hand closing blindly on the haft of some weapon, and as he leaped from the hut a harpy soared from under his very feet. It was an ax that Kane had snatched up, and he dealt a stroke that spattered the demon's brains like water. He sprang forward, stumbling over bodies and parts of bodies, blood streaming from a dozen wounds, and then halted baffled and screaming with rage.

The bat-people were taking to the air. No longer would they face this white-skinned madman who in his insanity was more terrible than they. But they went not alone into the upper regions. In their lustful talons they bore writhing, screaming forms, and Kane, raging to and fro with his dripping ax, found himself alone in a corpse-choked village.

He threw back his head to shriek his hate at the fiends above him and he felt warm, thick drops fall into his face, while the shadowy skies were filled with the screams of agony and the laughter of monsters. And Kane's last vestige of reason snapped as the sounds of that ghastly feast in the skies filled the night and the blood that rained from the stars fell into his face. He gibbered to and fro, screaming chaotic blasphemies.

And was he not a symbol of Man, staggering among the tooth-marked bones and severed grinning heads of humans, brandishing a futile ax, and screaming incoherent hate at the grisly, winged shapes of Night that make him their prey, chuckling in demoniac triumph above him and dripping into his mad eyes the pitiful blood of their human victims?

V

The White-skinned Conqueror

A shuddering, white-faced dawn crept over the black hills to shiver above the red shambles that had been the village of Bogonda. The huts stood intact, except for the one which had sunk to smoldering coals, but the thatches of many were torn. Dismembered bones, half or wholly stripped of flesh, lay in the streets, and some were splintered as though they had been dropped from a great height.

It was a realm of the dead where was but one sign of life. Solomon Kane leaned on his blood-clotted ax and gazed upon the scene with dull, mad eyes. He was grimed and clotted with half-dried blood from long gashes on chest, face and shoulders, but he paid no heed to his hurts.

The people of Bogonda had not died alone. Seventeen harpies lay among the bones. Six of these Kane had slain. The rest had fallen

before the frantic dying desperation of the black people. But it was poor toll to take in return. Of the four-hundred-odd people of Upper Bogonda, not one had lived to see the dawn. And the harpies were gone – back to their caves in the black hills, gorged to repletion.

With slow, mechanical steps Kane went about gathering up his weapons. He found his sword, dirk, pistols and the ju-ju stave. He left the main village and went up the slope to the great hut of Goru. And there he halted, stung by a new horror. The ghastly humor of the harpies had prompted a delicious jest. Above the hut door stared the severed head of Goru. The fat cheeks were shrunken, the lips lolled in an aspect of horrified idiocy, and the eyes stared like a hurt child. And in those dead eyes Kane saw wonder and reproach.

Kane looked at the shambles that had been Bogonda, and he looked at the death mask of Goru. And he lifted his clenched fists above his head, and with glaring eyes raised and writhing lips flecked with froth, he cursed the sky and the earth and the spheres above and below. He cursed the cold stars, the blazing sun, the mocking moon and the whisper of the wind. He cursed all fates and destinies, all that he had loved or hated, the silent cities beneath the seas, the past ages and the future eons. In one soul-shaking burst of blasphemy he cursed the gods and devils who make mankind their sport, and he cursed Man who lives blindly on and blindly offers his back to the iron-hoofed feet of his gods.

Then as breath failed he halted, panting. From the lower reaches sounded the deep roaring of a lion and into the eyes of Solomon Kane came a crafty gleam. He stood long, as one frozen, and out of his madness grew a desperate plan. And he silently recanted his blasphemy, for if the brazen-hoofed gods made Man for their sport and plaything, they also gave him a brain that holds craft and cruelty greater than any other living thing.

“There you shall bide,” said Solomon Kane to the head of Goru. “The sun will wither you and the cold dews of night will shrivel you. But I will keep the kites from you and your eyes shall see the fall of your slayers. Aye, I could not save the people of Bogonda, but by the God of my race, I can avenge them. Man is the sport and sustenance of titanic beings of Night and Horror whose giant wings

hover ever above him. But even evil things may come to an end – and watch ye, Goru."

In the days that followed Kane labored mightily, beginning with the first gray light of dawn and toiling on past sunset, into the white moonlight till he fell and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. He snatched food as he worked and gave his wounds absolutely no heed, scarcely being aware that they healed of themselves. He went down into the lower levels and cut bamboo, great stacks of long, tough stalks. He cut thick branches of trees, and tough vines to serve as ropes. And with this material he reinforced the walls and roof of Goru's hut. He set the bamboos deep in the earth, hard against the wall, and interwove and twined them, binding them fast with the vines that were pliant and tough as cords. The long branches he made fast along the thatch, binding them close together. When he had finished, an elephant could scarcely have burst through the walls.

The lions had come into the plateau in great quantities and the herds of little pigs dwindled fast. Those the lions spared, Kane slew, and tossed to the jackals. This racked Kane's heart, for he was a kindly man and this wholesale slaughter, even of pigs who would fall prey to hunting beasts anyhow, grieved him. But it was part of his plan of vengeance and he steeled his heart.

The days stretched into weeks. Kane toiled by day and night, and between his stints he talked to the shriveled, mummied head of Goru, whose eyes, strangely enough, did not change in the blaze of the sun or the haunt of the moon, but retained their life-like expression. When the memory of those lunacy-haunted days had become only a vague nightmare, Kane wondered if, as it had seemed to him, Goru's dried lips had moved in answer, speaking strange and mysterious things.

Kane saw the akaanas wheeling against the sky at a distance, but they did not come near, even when he slept in the great hut, pistols at hand. They feared his power to deal death with smoke and thunder. At first he noted that they flew sluggishly, gorged with the flesh they had eaten on that red night, and the bodies they had borne to their caves. But as the weeks passed they appeared leaner

and leaner and ranged far afield in search of food. And Kane laughed, deeply and madly. This plan of his would never have worked before, but now there were no humans to fill the bellies of the harpy-folk. And there were no more pigs. In all the plateau there were no creatures for the bat-people to eat. Why they did not range east of the hills, Kane thought he knew. That must be a region of thick jungle like the country to the west. He saw them fly into the grassland for antelopes and he saw the lions take toll of them. After all, the akaanas were weak beings among the hunters, strong enough only to slay pigs and deer – and humans.

At last they began to soar close to him at night, and he saw their greedy eyes glaring at him through the gloom. He judged the time was ripe. Huge buffaloes, too big and ferocious for the bat-people to slay, had strayed up into the plateau to ravage the deserted fields of the dead black people. Kane cut one of these out of the herd and drove him, with shouts and volleys of stones, to the hut of Goru. It was a tedious, dangerous task, and time and again Kane barely escaped the surly bull's sudden charges, but persevered and at last shot the beast before the hut.

A strong west wind was blowing and Kane flung handfuls of blood into the air for the scent to waft to the harpies in the hills. He cut the bull to pieces and carried its quarters into the hut, then managed to drag the huge trunk itself inside. Then he retired into the thick trees near by and waited.

He had not long to wait. The morning air filled suddenly with the beat of many wings and a hideous flock alighted before the hut of Goru. All of the beasts – or men – seemed to be there, and Kane gazed in wonder at the tall, strange creatures, so like to humanity and yet so unlike – the veritable demons of priestly legend. They folded their wings like cloaks about them as they walked upright and they talked to one another in a strident crackling voice that had nothing of the human in it. No, these things were not men, Kane decided. They were the materialization of some ghastly jest of Nature – some travesty of the world's infancy when Creation was an experiment. Perhaps they were the offspring of a forbidden and obscene mating of man and beast; more likely they were a freakish

offshoot on the branch of evolution – for Kane had long ago dimly sensed a truth in the heretical theories of the ancient philosophers, that Man is but a higher beast. And if Nature made many strange beasts in the past ages, why should she not have experimented with monstrous forms of mankind? Surely Man as Kane knew him was not the first of his breed to walk the earth, nor yet to be the last.

Now the harpies hesitated, with their natural distrust for a building, and some soared to the roof and tore at the thatch. But Kane had builded well. They returned to earth and at last, driven beyond endurance by the smell of raw blood and the sight of the flesh within, one of them ventured inside. In an instant all were crowded into the great hut, tearing ravenously at the meat, and when the last one was within, Kane reached out a hand and jerked a long vine which tripped the catch that held the door he had built. It fell with a crash and the bar he had fashioned dropped into place. That door would hold against the charge of a wild bull.

Kane came from his covert and scanned the sky. Some hundred and forty harpies had entered the hut. He saw no more winging through the skies, and believed it safe to suppose he had the whole flock trapped. Then with a cruel, brooding smile, Kane struck flint and steel to a pile of dead leaves next the wall. Within sounded an uneasy mumbling as the creatures realized that they were prisoners. A thin wisp of smoke curled upward and a flicker of red followed it; the whole heap burst into flame and the dry bamboo caught.

A few moments later the whole side of the wall was ablaze. The fiends inside scented the smoke and grew restless. Kane heard them cackling wildly and clawing at the walls. He grinned savagely, bleakly and without mirth. Now a veer of the wind drove the flames around the wall and up over the thatch – with a roar the whole hut caught and leaped into flame. From within sounded a fearful pandemonium. Kane heard bodies crash against the walls, which shook to the impact but held. The horrid screams were music to his soul, and brandishing his arms, he answered them with screams of fearful, soul-shaking laughter. The cataclysm of horror rose unbearably, paling the tumult of the flames. Then it dwindled to a medley of strangled gibbering and gasps as the flames ate in and the

smoke thickened. An intolerable scent of burning flesh pervaded the atmosphere, and had there been room in Kane's brain for aught else than insane triumph, he would have shuddered to realize that the scent was of that nauseating and indescribable odor that only human flesh emits when burning.

From the thick cloud of smoke Kane saw a mowing, gibbering thing emerge through the shredding roof and flap slowly and agonizingly upward on fearfully burned wings. Calmly he aimed and fired, and the scorched and blinded thing tumbled back into the flaming mass just as the walls crashed in. To Kane it seemed that Goru's crumbling face, vanishing in the smoke, split suddenly in a wide grin and a sudden shout of exultant human laughter mingled eerily in the roar of the flames. But the smoke and an insane brain play queer tricks.

Kane stood with the ju-ju stave in one hand and the smoking pistol in the other, above the smoldering ruins that hid forever from the sight of man the last of those terrible, semi-human monsters whom another white-skinned hero had banished from Europe in an unknown age. Kane stood, an unconscious statue of triumph – the ancient empires fall, the dark-skinned peoples fade and even the demons of antiquity gasp their last, but over all stands the Aryan barbarian, white-skinned, cold-eyed, dominant, the supreme fighting man of the earth, whether he be clad in wolf-hide and horned helmet, or boots and doublet – whether he bear in his hand battle-ax or rapier – whether he be called Dorian, Saxon or Englishman – whether his name be Jason, Hengist or Solomon Kane.

Kane stood and the smoke curled upward into the morning sky, the roaring of foraging lions shook the plateau, and slowly, like light breaking through mists, sanity returned to him.

"The light of God's morning enters even into dark and lonesome lands," said Solomon Kane somberly. "Evil rules in the waste lands of the earth, but even evil may come to an end. Dawn follows midnight and even in this lost land the shadows shrink. Strange are Thy ways, oh God of my people, and who am I to question Thy

wisdom? My feet have fallen in evil ways but Thou hast brought me forth scatheless and hast made me a scourge for the Powers of Evil. Over the souls of men spread the condor wings of colossal monsters and all manner of evil things prey upon the heart and soul and body of Man. Yet it may be in some far day the shadows shall fade and the Prince of Darkness be chained forever in his hell. And till then mankind can but stand up stoutly to the monsters in his own heart and without, and with the aid of God he may yet triumph."

And Solomon Kane looked up into the silent hills and felt the silent call of the hills and the unguessed distances beyond; and Solomon Kane shifted his belt, took his staff firmly in his hand and turned his face eastward.

OceanofPDF.com

Solomon Kane's Homecoming

The white gulls wheeled above the cliffs,
   the air was slashed with foam,
The long tides moaned along the strand
   when Solomon Kane came home.
He walked in silence strange and dazed
   through the little Devon town,
His gaze, like a ghost's come back to life,
   roamed up the streets and down.

The people followed wonderingly
   to mark his spectral stare,
And in the tavern silently
   they thronged about him there.
He heard as a man hears in a dream
   the worn old rafters creak,
And Solomon lifted his drinking-jack
   and spoke as a ghost might speak:

"There sat Sir Richard Grenville once;
   in smoke and flame he passed,
"And we were one to fifty-three,
   but we gave them blast for blast.
"From crimson dawn to crimson dawn,
   we held the Dons at bay.
"The dead lay littered on our decks,
   our masts were shot away.

"We beat them back with broken blades,
   till crimson ran the tide;
"Death thundered in the cannon smoke
   when Richard Grenville died.
"We should have blown her hull apart
   and sunk beneath the Main."
The people saw upon his wrists
   the scars of the racks of Spain.

“Where is Bess?” said Solomon Kane.
“Woe that I caused her tears.”
“In the quiet churchyard by the sea
she has slept these seven years.”
The sea-wind moaned at the window-pane,
and Solomon bowed his head.
“Ashes to ashes and dust to dust,
and the fairest fade,” he said.

His eyes were mystical deep pools
that drowned unearthly things,
And Solomon lifted up his head
and spoke of his wanderings.
“Mine eyes have looked on sorcery
in the dark and naked lands,
“Horror born of the jungle gloom
and death on the pathless sands.

“And I have known a deathless queen
in a city old as Death,
“Where towering pyramids of skulls
her glory witnesseth.
“Her kiss was like an adder’s fang,
with the sweetness Lilith had,
“And her red-eyed vassals howled for blood
in that City of the Mad.

“And I have slain a vampire shape
that sucked a black king white,
“And I have roamed through grisly hills
where dead men walked at night.
“And I have seen heads fall like fruit
in the slaver’s barracoon,
“And I have seen winged demons fly
all naked in the moon.

“My feet are weary of wandering
   and age comes on apace;
“I fain would dwell in Devon now,
   forever in my place.”
The howling of the ocean pack
   came whistling down the gale,
And Solomon Kane threw up his head
   like a hound that snuffs a trail.

A-down the wind like a running pack
   the hounds of the ocean bayed,
And Solomon Kane rose up again
   and girt his Spanish blade.
In his strange cold eyes a vagrant gleam
   grew wayward and blind and bright,
And Solomon put the people by
   and went into the night.

A wild moon rode the wild white clouds,
   the waves in white crests flowed,
When Solomon Kane went forth again
   and no man knew his road.
They glimpsed him etched against the moon,
   where clouds on hilltop thinned;
They heard an eery echoed call
   that whistled down the wind.

OceanofPDF.com

Lord of Samarcand

The roar of battle had died away; the sun hung like a ball of crimson gold on the western hills. Across the trampled field of battle no squadrons thundered, no war-cry reverberated. Only the shrieks of the wounded and the moans of the dying rose to the circling vultures whose black wings swept closer and closer until they brushed the pallid faces in their flight.

On his rangy stallion, in a hillside thicket, Ak Boga the Tatar watched, as he had watched since dawn, when the mailed hosts of the Franks, with their forest of lances and flaming pennons, had moved out on the plains of Nicopolis to meet the grim hordes of Bayazid.

Ak Boga, watching their battle array, had chk-chk'd his teeth in surprize and disapproval as he saw the glittering squadrons of mounted knights draw out in front of the compact masses of stalwart infantry, and lead the advance. They were the flower of Europe – cavaliers of Austria, Germany, France and Italy; but Ak Boga shook his head.

He had seen the knights charge with a thunderous roar that shook the heavens, had seen them smite the outriders of Bayazid like a withering blast and sweep up the long slope in the teeth of a raking fire from the Turkish archers at the crest. He had seen them cut down the archers like ripe corn, and launch their whole power against the oncoming spahis, the Turkish light cavalry. And he had seen the spahis buckle and break and scatter like spray before a storm, the light-armed riders flinging aside their lances and spurring like mad out of the mêlée. But Ak Boga had looked back, where, far behind, the sturdy Hungarian pikemen toiled, seeking to keep within supporting distance of the headlong cavaliers.

He had seen the Frankish horsemen sweep on, reckless of their horses' strength as of their own lives, and cross the ridge. From his vantage-point Ak Boga could see both sides of that ridge and he knew that there lay the main power of the Turkish army – sixty-five thousand strong – the janizaries, the terrible Ottoman infantry,

supported by the heavy cavalry, tall men in strong armor, bearing spears and powerful bows.

And now the Franks realized, what Ak Boga had known, that the real battle lay before them; and their horses were weary, their lances broken, their throats choked with dust and thirst.

Ak Boga had seen them waver and look back for the Hungarian infantry; but it was out of sight over the ridge, and in desperation the knights hurled themselves on the massed enemy, striving to break the ranks by sheer ferocity. That charge never reached the grim lines. Instead a storm of arrows broke the Christian front, and this time, on exhausted horses, there was no riding against it. The whole first rank went down, horses and men pin-cushioned, and in that red shambles their comrades behind them stumbled and fell headlong. And then the janizaries charged with a deep-toned roar of "Allah!" that was like the thunder of deep surf.

All this Ak Boga had seen; had seen, too, the inglorious flight of some of the knights, the ferocious resistance of others. On foot, leaguered and outnumbered, they fought with sword and ax, falling one by one, while the tide of battle flowed around them on either side and the blood-drunken Turks fell upon the infantry which had just toiled into sight over the ridge.

There, too, was disaster. Flying knights thundered through the ranks of the Wallachians, and these broke and retired in ragged disorder. The Hungarians and Bavarians received the brunt of the Turkish onslaught, staggered and fell back stubbornly, contesting every foot, but unable to check the victorious flood of Moslem fury.

And now, as Ak Boga scanned the field, he no longer saw the serried lines of the pikemen and ax-fighters. They had fought their way back over the ridge and were in full, though ordered, retreat, and the Turks had come back to loot the dead and mutilate the dying. Such knights as had not fallen or broken away in flight, had flung down the hopeless sword and surrendered. Among the trees on the farther side of the vale, the main Turkish host was clustered, and even Ak Boga shivered a trifle at the screams which rose where Bayazid's swordsmen were butchering the captives. Nearer at hand ran ghoulish figures, swift and furtive, pausing briefly over each

heap of corpses; here and there gaunt dervishes with foam on their beards and madness in their eyes plied their knives on writhing victims who screamed for death.

"Erlik!" muttered Ak Boga. "They boasted that they could hold up the sky on their lances, were it to fall, and lo, the sky has fallen and their host is meat for the ravens!"

He reined his horse away through the thicket; there might be good plunder among the plumed and corseleted dead, but Ak Boga had come hither on a mission which was yet to be completed. But even as he emerged from the thicket, he saw a prize no Tatar could forego – a tall Turkish steed with an ornate high-peaked Turkish saddle came racing by. Ak Boga spurred quickly forward and caught the flying, silver-worked rein. Then, leading the restive charger, he trotted swiftly down the slope away from the battlefield.

Suddenly he reined in among a clump of stunted trees. The hurricane of strife, slaughter and pursuit had cast its spray on this side of the ridge. Before him Ak Boga saw a tall, richly clad knight grunting and cursing as he sought to hobble along using his broken lance as a crutch. His helmet was gone, revealing a blond head and a florid choleric face. Not far away lay a dead horse, an arrow protruding from its ribs.

As Ak Boga watched, the big knight stumbled and fell with a scorching oath. Then from the bushes came a man such as Ak Boga had never seen before, even among the Franks. This man was taller than Ak Boga, who was a big man, and his stride was like that of a gaunt gray wolf. He was bareheaded, a tousled shock of tawny hair topping a sinister scarred face, burnt dark by the sun, and his eyes were cold as gray icy steel. The great sword he trailed was crimson to the hilt, his rusty scale-mail shirt hacked and rent, the kilt beneath it torn and slashed. His right arm was stained to the elbow, and blood dripped sluggishly from a deep gash in his left forearm.

"Devil take all!" growled the crippled knight in Norman French, which Ak Boga understood; "this is the end of the world!"

"Only the end of a horde of fools," the tall Frank's voice was hard and cold, like the rasp of a sword in its scabbard.

The lame man swore again. “Stand not there like a blockhead, fool! Catch me a horse! My damnable steed caught a shaft in its cursed hide, and though I spurred it until the blood spurted over my heels, it fell at last, and I think, broke my ankle.”

The tall one dropped his sword-point to the earth and stared at the other somberly.

“You give commands as though you sat in your own fief of Saxony, Lord Baron Frederik! But for you and divers other fools, we had cracked Bayazid like a nut this day.”

“Dog!” roared the baron, his intolerant face purpling; “this insolence to me? I’ll have you flayed alive!”

“Who but you cried down the Elector in council?” snarled the other, his eyes glittering dangerously. “Who called Sigismund of Hungary a fool because he urged that the lord allow him to lead the assault with his infantry? And who but you had the ear of that young fool High Constable of France, Philip of Artois, so that in the end he led the charge that ruined us all, nor would wait on the ridge for support from the Hungarians? And now you, who turned tail quicker than any when you saw what your folly had done, you bid me fetch you a horse!”

“Aye, and quickly, you Scottish dog!” screamed the baron, convulsed with fury. “You shall answer for this –”

“I’ll answer here,” growled the Scotsman, his manner changing murderously. “You have heaped insults on me since we first sighted the Danube. If I’m to die, I’ll settle one score first!”

“Traitor!” bellowed the baron, whitening, scrambling up on his knee and reaching for his sword. But even as he did so, the Scotsman struck, with an oath, and the baron’s roar was cut short in a ghastly gurgle as the great blade sheared through shoulder-bone, ribs and spine, casting the mangled corpse limply upon the blood-soaked earth.

“Well struck, warrior!” At the sound of the guttural voice the slayer wheeled like a great wolf, wrenching free the sword. For a tense moment the two eyed each other, the swordsman standing above his victim, a brooding somber figure terrible with

potentialities of blood and slaughter, the Tatar sitting his high-peaked saddle like a carven image.

"I am no Turk," said Ak Boga. "You have no quarrel with me. See, my simitar is in its sheath. I have need of a man like you – strong as a bear, swift as a wolf, cruel as a falcon. I can bring you to much you desire."

"I desire only vengeance on the head of Bayazid," rumbled the Scotsman.

The dark eyes of the Tatar glittered.

"Then come with me. For my lord is the sworn enemy of the Turk."

"Who is your lord?" asked the Scotsman suspiciously.

"Men call him the Lame," answered Ak Boga, "Timour, the Servant of God, by the favor of Allah, Amir of Tatary."

The Scotsman turned his head in the direction of the distant shrieks which told that the massacre was still continuing, and stood for an instant like a great bronze statue. Then he sheathed his sword with a savage rasp of steel.

"I will go," he said briefly.

The Tatar grinned with pleasure, and leaning forward, gave into his hands the reins of the Turkish horse. The Frank swung into the saddle and glanced inquiringly at Ak Boga. The Tatar motioned with his helmeted head and reined away down the slope. They touched in the spurs and cantered swiftly away into the gathering twilight, while behind them the shrieks of dire agony still rose to the shivering stars which peered palely out, as if frightened by man's slaughter of man.

II

Had we twa been upon the green,
  And never an eye to see,
I wad hae had you, flesh and fell;
  But your sword shall gae wi' me.

– The Ballad of Otterbourne

Again the sun was sinking, this time over a desert, etching the spires and minarets of a blue city. Ak Boga drew rein on the crest of a rise and sat motionless for a moment, sighing deeply as he drank in the familiar sight, whose wonder never faded.

"Samarcand," said Ak Boga.

"We have ridden far," answered his companion. Ak Boga smiled. The Tatar's garments were dusty, his mail tarnished, his face somewhat drawn, though his eyes still twinkled. The Scotsman's strongly chiselled features had not altered.

"You are of steel, bogatyr," said Ak Boga. "The road we have traveled would have wearied a courier of Genghis Khan. And by Erlik, I, who was bred in the saddle, am the wearier of the twain!"

The Scotsman gazed unspeaking at the distant spires, remembering the days and nights of apparently endless riding, when he had slept swaying in the saddle, and all the sounds of the universe had died down to the thunder of hoofs. He had followed Ak Boga unquestioning: through hostile hills where they avoided trails and cut through the blind wilderness, over mountains where the chill winds cut like a sword-edge, into stretches of steppes and desert. He had not questioned when Ak Boga's relaxing vigilance told him that they were out of hostile country, and when the Tatar began to stop at wayside posts where tall dark men in iron helmets brought fresh steeds. Even then there was no slacking of the headlong pace: a swift guzzling of wine and snatching of food; occasionally a brief interlude of sleep, on a heap of hides and cloaks; then again the drum of racing hoofs. The Frank knew that Ak Boga was bearing the news of the battle to his mysterious lord, and he wondered at the distance they had covered between the first post where saddled steeds awaited them and the blue spires that marked their journey's end. Wide-flung indeed were the boundaries of the lord called Timour the Lame.

They had covered that vast expanse of country in a time the Frank would have sworn impossible. He felt now the grinding wear of that terrible ride, but he gave no outward sign. The city shimmered to his gaze, mingling with the blue of the distance, so that it seemed part of the horizon, a city of illusion and enchantment. Blue: the

Tatars lived in a wide magnificent land, lavish with color schemes, and the prevailing motif was blue. In the spires and domes of Samarcand were mirrored the hues of the skies, the far mountains and the dreaming lakes.

"You have seen lands and seas no Frank has beheld," said Ak Boga, "and rivers and towns and caravan trails. Now you shall gaze upon the glory of Samarcand, which the lord Timour found a town of dried brick and has made a metropolis of blue stone and ivory and marble and silver filigree."

The two descended into the plain and threaded their way between converging lines of camel-caravans and mule-trains whose robed drivers shouted incessantly, all bound for the Turquoise Gates, laden with spices, silks, jewels, and slaves, the goods and gauds of India and Cathay, of Persia and Arabia and Egypt.

"All the East rides the road to Samarcand," said Ak Boga.

They passed through the wide gilt-inlaid gates where the tall spearmen shouted boisterous greetings to Ak Boga, who yelled back, rolling in his saddle and smiting his mailed thigh with the joy of homecoming. They rode through the wide winding streets, past palace and market and mosque, and bazars thronged with the people of a hundred tribes and races, bartering, disputing, shouting. The Scotsman saw hawk-faced Arabs, lean apprehensive Syrians, fat fawning Jews, turbaned Indians, languid Persians, ragged swaggering but suspicious Afghans, and more unfamiliar forms; figures from the mysterious reaches of the north, and the far east; stocky Mongols with broad inscrutable faces and the rolling gait of an existence spent in the saddle; slant-eyed Cathayans in robes of watered silk; tall quarrelsome Vigurs; round-faced Kipchaks; narrow-eyed Kirghiz; a score of races whose existence the West did not guess. All the Orient flowed in a broad river through the gates of Samarcand.

The Frank's wonder grew; the cities of the West were hovels compared to this. Past academies, libraries and pleasure-pavilions they rode, and Ak Boga turned into a wide gateway, guarded by silver lions. There they gave their steeds into the hands of silk-sashed grooms, and walked along a winding avenue paved with

marble and lined with slim green trees. The Scotsman, looking between the slender trunks, saw shimmering expanses of roses, cherry trees and waving exotic blossoms unknown to him, where fountains jetted arches of silver spray. So they came to the palace, gleaming blue and gold in the sunlight, passed between tall marble columns and entered the chambers with their gilt-worked arched doorways, and walls decorated with delicate paintings of Persian and Cathayan artists, and the gold tissue and silver work of Indian artistry.

Ak Boga did not halt in the great reception room with its slender carven columns and frieze-work of gold and turquoise, but continued until he came to the fretted gold-adorned arch of a door which opened into a small blue-domed chamber that looked out through gold-barred windows into a series of broad, shaded, marble-paved galleries. There silk-robed courtiers took their weapons, and grasping their arms, led them between files of giant black mutes in silken loin-cloths, who held two-handed simitars upon their shoulders, and into the chamber, where the courtiers released their arms and fell back, salaaming deeply. Ak Boga knelt before the figure on the silken divan, but the Scotsman stood grimly erect, nor was obeisance required of him. Some of the simplicity of Genghis Khan’s court still lingered in the courts of these descendants of the nomads.

The Scotsman looked closely at the man on the divan; this, then, was the mysterious Tamerlane, who was already become a mythical figure in Western lore. He saw a man as tall as himself, gaunt but heavy-boned, with a wide sweep of shoulders and the Tatar's characteristic depth of chest. His face was not as dark as Ak Boga's, nor did his black magnetic eyes slant; and he did not sit cross-legged as a Mongol sits. There was power in every line of his figure, in his clean-cut features, in the crisp black hair and beard, untouched with gray despite his sixty-one years. There was something of the Turk in his appearance, thought the Scotsman, but the dominant note was

the lean wolfish hardness that suggested the nomad. He was closer to the basic Turanian rootstock than was the Turk; nearer to the wolfish, wandering Mongols who were his ancestors.

"Speak, Ak Boga," said the Amir in a deep powerful voice. "Ravens have flown westward, but there has come no word."

"We rode before the word, my lord," answered the warrior. "The news is at our heels, traveling swift on the caravan roads. Soon the couriers, and after them the traders and the merchants, will bring to you the news that a great battle has been fought in the west; that Bayazid has broken the hosts of the Christians, and the wolves howl over the corpses of the kings of Frankistan."

"And who stands beside you?" asked Timour, resting his chin on his hand and fixing his deep somber eyes on the Scotsman.

"A chief of the Franks who escaped the slaughter," answered Ak Boga. "Single-handed he cut his way through the mêlée, and in his flight paused to slay a Frankish lord who had put shame upon him aforetime. He has no fear and his thews are steel. By Allah, we passed through the land outracing the wind to bring thee news of the war, and this Frank is less weary than I, who learned to ride ere I learned to walk."

"Why do you bring him to me?"

"It was my thought that he would make a mighty warrior for thee, my lord."

"In all the world," mused Timour, "there are scarce half a dozen men whose judgment I trust. Thou art one of those," he added briefly, and Ak Boga, who had flushed darkly in embarrassment, grinned delightedly.

"Can he understand me?" asked Timour.

"He speaks Turki, my lord."

"How are you named, oh Frank?" queried the Amir. "And what is your rank?"

"I am called Donald MacDeesa," answered the Scotsman. "I come from the country of Scotland, beyond Frankistan. I have no rank, either in my own land or in the army I followed. I live by my wits and the edge of my claymore."

"Why do you ride to me?"

“Ak Boga told me it was the road to vengeance.”

“Against whom?”

“Bayazid the Sultan of the Turks, whom men name the Thunderer.”

Timour dropped his head on his mighty breast for a space and in the silence MacDeesa heard the silvery tinkle of a fountain in an outer court and the musical voice of a Persian poet singing to a lute.

Then the great Tatar lifted his lion’s head.

“Sit ye with Ak Boga upon this divan close at my hand,” said he. “I will instruct you how to trap a gray wolf.”

As Donald did so, he unconsciously lifted a hand to his face, as if he felt the sting of a blow eleven years old. Irrelevantly his mind reverted to another king and another, ruder court, and in the swift instant that elapsed as he took his seat close to the Amir, glanced fleetingly along the bitter trail of his life.

Young Lord Douglas, most powerful of all the Scottish barons, was headstrong and impetuous, and like most Norman lords, choleric when he fancied himself crossed. But he should not have struck the lean young Highlander who had come down into the border country seeking fame and plunder in the train of the lords of the marches. Douglas was accustomed to using both riding-whip and fists freely on his pages and esquires, and promptly forgetting both the blow and the cause; and they, being also Normans and accustomed to the tempers of their lords, likewise forgot. But Donald MacDeesa was no Norman; he was a Gael, and Gaelic ideas of honor and insult differ from Norman ideas as the wild uplands of the North differ from the fertile plains of the Lowlands. The chief of Donald’s clan could not have struck him with impunity, and for a Southron to so venture – hate entered the young Highlander’s blood like a black river and filled his dreams with crimson nightmares.

Douglas forgot the blow too quickly to regret it. But Donald’s was the vengeful heart of those wild folk who keep the fires of feud flaming for centuries and carry grudges to the grave. Donald was as fully Celtic as his savage Dalriadian ancestors who carved out the kingdom of Alba with their swords.

But he hid his hate and bided his time, and it came in a hurricane of border war. Robert Bruce lay in his tomb, and his heart, stilled forever, lay somewhere in Spain beneath the body of Black Douglas, who had failed in the pilgrimage which was to place the heart of his king before the Holy Sepulcher. The great king's grandson, Robert II, had little love for storm and stress; he desired peace with England and he feared the great family of Douglas.

But despite his protests, war spread flaming wings along the border and the Scottish lords rode joyfully on the foray. But before the Douglas marched, a quiet and subtle man came to Donald MacDeesa's tent and spoke briefly and to the point.

"Knowing that the aforesaid lord hath put despite upon thee, I whispered thy name softly to him that sendeth me, and sooth, it is well known that this same bloody lord doth continually embroil the kingdoms and stir up wrath and wo between the sovereigns –" he said in part, and he plainly spoke the word, "Protection."

Donald made no answer and the quiet person smiled and left the young Highlander sitting with his chin on his fist, staring grimly at the floor of his tent.

Thereafter Lord Douglas marched right gleefully with his retainers into the border country and "burned the dales of Tyne, and part of Bambroughshire, and three good towers on Reidswire fells, he left them all on fire," and spread wrath and wo generally among the border English, so that King Richard sent notes of bitter reproach to King Robert, who bit his nails with rage, but waited patiently for news he expected to hear.

Then after an indecisive skirmish at Newcastle, Douglas encamped in a place called Otterbourne, and there Lord Percy, hot with wrath, came suddenly upon him in the night, and in the confused mêlée which ensued, called by the Scottish the Battle of Otterbourne and by the English Chevy Chase, Lord Douglas fell. The English swore he was slain by Lord Percy, who neither confirmed nor denied it, not knowing himself what men he had slain in the confusion and darkness.

But a wounded man babbled of a Highland plaid, before he died, and an ax wielded by no English hand. Men came to Donald and

questioned him hardly, but he snarled at them like a wolf, and the king, after piously burning many candles for Douglas' soul in public, and thanking God for the baron's demise in the privacy of his chamber, announced that "we have heard of this persecution of a loyal subject and it being plain in our mind that this youth is innocent as ourselves in this matter we hereby warn all men against further hounding of him at pain of death."

So the king's protection saved Donald's life, but men muttered in their teeth and ostracized him. Sullen and embittered, he withdrew to himself and brooded in a hut alone, till one night there came news of the king's sudden abdication and retirement into a monastery. The stress of a monarch's life in those stormy times was too much for the monkish sovereign. Close on the heels of the news came men with drawn daggers to Donald's hut, but they found the cage empty. The hawk had flown, and though they followed his trail with reddened spurs, they found only a steed that had fallen dead at the seashore, and saw only a white sail dwindling in the growing dawn.

Donald went to the Continent because, with the Lowlands barred to him, there was nowhere else to go; in the Highlands he had too many blood-feuds; and across the border the English had already made a noose for him. That was in 1389. Seven years of fighting and intriguing in European wars and plots. And when Constantinople cried out before the irresistible onslaught of Bayazid, and men pawned their lands to launch a new Crusade, the Highland swordsman had joined the tide that swept eastward to its doom. Seven years – and a far cry from the border marches to the blue-domed palaces of fabulous Samarcand, reclining on a silken divan as he listened to the measured words which flowed in a tranquil monotone from the lips of the lord of Tatary.

III

If thou'rt the lord of this castle,
  Sae well it pleases me:
For, ere I cross the border fells,

The tane of us shall dee.

– Battle of Otterbourne

Time flowed on as it does whether men live or die. The bodies rotted on the plains of Nicopolis, and Bayazid, drunk with power, trampled the scepters of the world. The Greeks, the Serbs and the Hungarians he ground beneath his iron legions, and into his spreading empire he molded the captive races. He laved his limbs in wild debauchery, the frenzy of which astounded even his tough vassals. The women of the world flowed whimpering between his iron fingers and he hammered the golden crowns of kings to shoe his war-steed. Constantinople reeled beneath his strokes, and Europe licked her wounds like a crippled wolf, held at bay on the defensive. Somewhere in the misty mazes of the East moved his arch-foe Timour, and to him Bayazid sent missives of threat and mockery. No response was forthcoming, but word came along the caravans of a mighty marching and a great war in the south; of the plumed helmets of India scattered and flying before the Tatar spears. Little heed gave Bayazid; India was little more real to him than it was to the Pope of Rome. His eyes were turned westward toward the Caphar cities. “I will harrow Frankistan with steel and flame,” he said. “Their sultans shall draw my chariots and the bats lair in the palaces of the infidels.”

Then in the early spring of 1402 there came to him, in an inner court of his pleasure-palace at Brusa, where he lolled guzzling the forbidden wine and watching the antics of naked dancing girls, certain of his emirs, bringing a tall Frank whose grim scarred visage was darkened by the suns of far deserts.

“This Caphar dog rode into the camp of the janizaries as a madman rides, on a foam-covered steed,” said they, “saying he sought Bayazid. Shall we flay him before thee, or tear him between wild horses?”

“Dog,” said the Sultan, drinking deeply and setting down the goblet with a satisfied sigh, “you have found Bayazid. Speak, ere I set you howling on a stake.”

“Is this fit welcome for one who has ridden far to serve you?” retorted the Frank in a harsh unshaken voice. “I am Donald MacDeesa and among your janizaries there is no man who can stand up against me in sword-play, and among your barrel-bellied wrestlers there is no man whose back I can not break.”

The Sultan tugged his black beard and grinned.

“Would thou wert not an infidel,” said he, “for I love a man with a bold tongue. Speak on, oh Rustum! What other accomplishments are thine, mirror of modesty?”

The Highlander grinned like a wolf.

“I can break the back of a Tatar and roll the head of a Khan in the dust.”

Bayazid stiffened, subtly changing, his giant frame charged with dynamic power and menace; for behind all his roistering and bellowing conceit was the keenest brain west of the Oxus.

“What folly is this?” he rumbled. “What means this riddle?”

“I speak no riddle,” snapped the Gael. “I have no more love for you than you for me. But more I hate Timour-il-leng who has cast dung in my face.”

“You come to me from that half-pagan dog?”

“Aye. I was his man. I rode beside him and cut down his foes. I climbed city walls in the teeth of the arrows and broke the ranks of mailed spearmen. And when the honors and gifts were distributed among the emirs, what was given me? The gall of mockery and the wormwood of insult. ‘Ask thy dog-sultans of Frankistan for gifts, Caphar,’ said Timour – may the worms devour him – and the emirs roared with laughter. As God is my witness, I will wipe out that laughter in the crash of falling walls and the roar of flames!”

Donald’s menacing voice reverberated through the chamber and his eyes were cold and cruel. Bayazid pulled his beard for a space and said, “And you come to me for vengeance? Shall I war against the Lame One because of the spite of a wandering Caphar vagabond?”

“You *will* war against him, or he against you,” answered MacDeesa. “When Timour wrote asking that you lend no aid to his foes, Kara Yussef the Turkoman, and Ahmed, Sultan of Bagdad, you

answered him with words not to be borne, and sent horsemen to stiffen their ranks against him. Now the Turkomans are broken, Bagdad has been looted and Damascus lies in smoking ruins. Timour has broken your allies and he will not forget the despite you put upon him."

"Close have you been to the Lame One to know all this," muttered Bayazid, his glittering eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Why should I trust a Frank? By Allah, I deal with them by the sword! As I dealt with those fools at Nicopolis!"

A fierce uncontrollable flame leaped up for a fleeting instant in the Highlander's eyes, but the dark face showed no sign of emotion.

"Know this, Turk," he answered with an oath, "I can show you how to break Timour's back."

"Dog!" roared the Sultan, his gray eyes blazing, "think you I need the aid of a nameless rogue to conquer the Tatar?"

Donald laughed in his face, a hard mirthless laugh that was not pleasant.

"Timour will crack you like a walnut," said he deliberately. "Have you seen the Tatars in war array? Have you seen their arrows darkening the sky as they loosed, a hundred thousand as one? Have you seen their horsemen flying before the wind as they charged home and the desert shook beneath their hoofs? Have you seen the array of their elephants, with towers on their backs, whence archers send shafts in black clouds and the fire that burns flesh and leather alike pours forth?"

"All this I have heard," answered the Sultan, not particularly impressed.

"But you have not seen," returned the Highlander; he drew back his tunic sleeve and displayed a scar on his iron-thewed arm. "An Indian tulwar kissed me there, before Delhi. I rode with the emirs when the whole world seemed to shake with the thunder of combat. I saw Timour trick the Sultan of Hindustan and draw him from the lofty walls as a serpent is drawn from its lair. By God, the plumed Rajputs fell like ripened grain before us!

"Of Delhi Timour left a pile of deserted ruins, and without the broken walls he built a pyramid of a hundred thousand skulls. You

would say I lied were I to tell you how many days the Khyber Pass was thronged with the glittering hosts of warriors and captives returning along the road to Samarcand. The mountains shook with their tread and the wild Afghans came down in hordes to place their heads beneath Timour's heel – as he will grind *thy* head underfoot, Bayazid!"

"This to me, dog?" yelled the Sultan. "I will fry you in oil!"

"Aye, prove your power over Timour by slaying the dog he mocked," answered MacDeesa bitterly. "You kings are all alike in fear and folly."

Bayazid gaped at him. "By Allah!" he said, "thou'rt mad to speak thus to the Thunderer. Bide in my court until I learn whether thou be rogue, fool, or madman. If spy, not in a day or three days will I slay thee, but for a full week shalt thou howl for death."

So Donald abode in the court of the Thunderer, under suspicion, and soon there came a brief but peremptory note from Timour, asking that "the thief of a Christian who hath taken refuge in the Ottoman court" be given up for just punishment. Whereat Bayazid, scenting an opportunity to further insult his rival, twisted his black beard gleefully between his fingers and grinned like a hyena as he dictated a reply, "Know, thou crippled dog, that the Osmanli are not in the habit of conceding to the insolent demands of pagan foes. Be at ease while thou mayest, oh lame dog, for soon I will take thy kingdom for an offal-heap and thy favorite wives for my concubines."

No further missives came from Timour. Bayazid drew Donald into wild revels, plied him with strong drink and even as he roared and roistered, he keenly watched the Highlander. But even his suspicions grew blunter when at his drunkest Donald spoke no word that might hint he was other than he seemed. He breathed the name of Timour only with curses. Bayazid discounted the value of his aid against the Tatars, but contemplated putting him to use, as Ottoman sultans always employed foreigners for confidants and guardsmen, knowing their own race too well. Under close, subtle scrutiny the Gael indifferently moved, drinking all but the Sultan onto the floor in the wild drinking-bouts and bearing himself with a reckless valor

that earned the respect of the hard-bitten Turks, in forays against the Byzantines.

Playing Genoese against Venetian, Bayazid lay about the walls of Constantinople. His preparations were made: Constantinople, and after that, Europe; the fate of Christendom wavered in the balance, there before the walls of the ancient city of the East. And the wretched Greeks, worn and starved, had already drawn up a capitulation, when word came flying out of the East, a dusty, blood-stained courier on a staggering horse. Out of the East, sudden as a desert-storm, the Tatars had swept, and Sivas, Bayazid's border city, had fallen. That night the shuddering people on the walls of Constantinople saw torches and cressets tossing and moving through the Turkish camp, gleaming on dark hawk-faces and polished armor, but the expected attack did not come, and dawn revealed a great flotilla of boats moving in a steady double stream back and forth across the Bosphorus, bearing the mailed warriors into Asia. The Thunderer's eyes were at last turned eastward.

IV

> The deer runs wild on hill and dale,
> The birds fly wild from tree to tree;
> But there is neither bread nor kale,
> To fend my men and me.
>
> – Battle of Otterbourne

"Here we will camp," said Bayazid, shifting his giant body in the gold-crusted saddle. He glanced back at the long lines of his army, winding beyond sight over the distant hills: over 200,000 fighting men; grim janizaries, spahis glittering in plumes and silver mail, heavy cavalry in silk and steel; and his allies and alien subjects, Greek and Wallachian pikemen, the twenty thousand horsemen of King Peter Lazarus of Serbia, mailed from crown to heel; there were troops of Tatars, too, who had wandered into Asia Minor and been ground into the Ottoman empire with the rest – stocky Kalmucks, who had been on the point of mutiny at the beginning of the march,

but had been quieted by a harangue from Donald MacDeesa, in their own tongue.

For weeks the Turkish host had moved eastward on the Sivas road, expecting to encounter the Tatars at any point. They had passed Angora, where the Sultan had established his base-camp; they had crossed the river Halys, or Kizil Irmak, and now were marching through the hill country that lies in the bend of that river which, rising east of Sivas, sweeps southward in a vast half-circle before it bends, west of Kirshehr, northward to the Black Sea.

"Here we camp," repeated Bayazid; "Sivas lies some sixty-five miles to the east. We will send scouts into the city."

"They will find it deserted," predicted Donald, riding at Bayazid's side, and the Sultan scoffed, "Oh gem of wisdom, will the Lame One flee so quickly?"

"He will not flee," answered the Gael. "Remember he can move his host far more quickly than you can. He will take to the hills and fall suddenly upon us when you least expect it."

Bayazid snorted his contempt. "Is he a magician, to flit among the hills with a horde of 150,000 men? Bah! I tell you, he will come along the Sivas road to join battle, and we will crack him like a nutshell."

So the Turkish host went into camp and fortified the hills, and there they waited with growing wrath and impatience for a week. Bayazid's scouts returned with the news that only a handful of Tatars held Sivas. The Sultan roared with rage and bewilderment.

"Fools, have ye passed the Tatars on the road?"

"Nay, by Allah," swore the riders, "they vanished in the night like ghosts, none can say whither. And we have combed the hills between this spot and the city."

"Timour has fled back to his desert," said Peter Lazarus, and Donald laughed.

"When rivers run uphill, Timour will flee," said he; "he lurks somewhere in the hills to the south."

Bayazid had never taken other men's advice, for he had found long ago that his own wit was superior. But now he was puzzled. He had never before fought the desert riders whose secret of victory

was mobility and who passed through the land like blown clouds. Then his outriders brought in word that bodies of mounted men had been seen moving parallel to the Turkish right wing.

MacDeesa laughed like a jackal barking. “Now Timour sweeps upon us from the south, as I predicted.”

Bayazid drew up his lines and waited for the assault, but it did not come and his scouts reported that the riders had passed on and disappeared. Bewildered for the first time in his career, and mad to come to grips with his illusive foe, Bayazid struck camp and on a forced march reached the Halys river in two days, where he expected to find Timour drawn up to dispute his passage. No Tatar was to be seen. The Sultan cursed in his black beard; were these eastern devils ghosts, to vanish in thin air? He sent riders across the river and they came flying back, splashing recklessly through the shallow water. They had seen the Tatar rear-guard. Timour had eluded the whole Turkish army, and was even now marching on Angora! Frothing, Bayazid turned on MacDeesa.

“Dog, what have you to say now?”

“What would you?” the Highlander stood his ground boldly. “You have none but yourself to blame, if Timour has outwitted you. Have you harkened to me in aught, good or bad? I told you Timour would not await your coming, nor did he. I told you he would leave the city and go into the southern hills. And he did. I told you he would fall upon us suddenly, and therein I was mistaken. I did not guess that he would cross the river and elude us. But all else I warned you of has come to pass.”

Bayazid grudgingly admitted the truth of the Frank’s words, but he was mad with fury. Else he had never sought to overtake the swift-moving horde before it reached Angora. He flung his columns across the river and started on the track of the Tatars. Timour had crossed the river near Sivas, and moving around the outer bend, eluded the Turks on the other side. And now Bayazid followed his road, which swung outward from the river, into the plains where there was little water – and no food, after the horde had swept through with torch and blade.

The Turks marched over a fire-blackened, slaughter-reddened waste. Timour covered the ground in three days, over which Bayazid's columns staggered in a week of forced marching; a hundred miles through the burning, desolated plain, strewn with bare hills that made marching a hell. As the strength of the army lay in its infantry, the cavalry was forced to set its pace with the foot-soldiers, and all stumbled wearily through the clouds of stinging dust that rose from beneath the sore, shuffling feet. Under a burning summer sun they plodded grimly along, suffering fiercely from hunger and thirst.

So they came at last to the plain of Angora, and saw the Tatars installed in the camp they had left, besieging the city. And a roar of desperation went up from the thirst-maddened Turks. Timour had changed the course of the little river which ran through Angora, so that now it ran behind the Tatar lines; the only way to reach it was straight through the desert hordes. The springs and wells of the countryside had been polluted or damaged. For an instant Bayazid sat silent in his saddle, gazing from the Tatar camp to his own long straggling lines, and the marks of suffering and vain wrath in the drawn faces of his warriors. A strange fear tugged at his heart, so unfamiliar he did not recognize the emotion. Victory had always been his; could it ever be otherwise?

V

What's yon that follows at my side? –
The foe that ye must fight, my lord, –
That hirples swift as I can ride? –
The shadow of the night, my lord.

– *Kipling*

On that still summer morning the battle-lines stood ready for the death-grip. The Turks were drawn up in a long crescent, whose tips overlapped the Tatar wings, one of which touched the river and the other an entrenched hill fifteen miles away across the plain.

"Never in all my life have I sought another's advice in war," said Bayazid, "but you rode with Timour six years. Will he come to me?"

Donald shook his head. “You outnumber his host. He will never fling his riders against the solid ranks of your janizaries. He will stand afar off and overwhelm you with flights of arrows. You must go to him.”

“Can I charge his horse with my infantry?” snarled Bayazid. “Yet you speak wise words. I must hurl my horse against his – and Allah knows his is the better cavalry.”

“His right wing is the weaker,” said Donald, a sinister light burning in his eyes. “Mass your strongest horsemen on your left wing, charge and shatter that part of the Tatar host; then let your left wing close in, assailing the main battle of the Amir on the flank, while your janizaries advance from the front. Before the charge the spahis on your right wing may make a feint at the lines, to draw Timour’s attention.”

Bayazid looked silently at the Gael. Donald had suffered as much as the rest on that fearful march. His mail was white with dust, his lips blackened, his throat caked with thirst.

“So let it be,” said Bayazid. “Prince Suleiman shall command the left wing, with the Serbian horse and my own heavy cavalry, supported by the Kalmucks. We will stake all on one charge!”

And so they took up their positions, and no one noticed a flat-faced Kalmuck steal out of the Turkish lines and ride for Timour’s camp, flogging his stocky pony like mad. On the left wing was massed the powerful Serbian cavalry and the Turkish heavy horse, with the bow-armed Kalmucks behind. At the head of these rode Donald, for they had clamored for the Frank to lead them against their kin. Bayazid did not intend to match bow-fire with the Tatars, but to drive home a charge that would shatter Timour’s lines before the Amir could further outmaneuver him. The Turkish right wing consisted of the spahis; the center of the janizaries and Serbian foot with Peter Lazarus, under the personal command of the Sultan.

Timour had no infantry. He sat with his bodyguard on a hillock behind the lines. Nur ad-Din commanded the right wing of the riders of high Asia, Ak Boga the left, Prince Muhammad the center. With the center were the elephants in their leather trappings, with their battle-towers and archers. Their awesome trumpeting was the

only sound along the widespread steel-clad Tatar lines as the Turks came on with a thunder of cymbals and kettle-drums.

Like a thunderbolt Suleiman launched his squadrons at the Tatar right wing. They ran full into a terrible blast of arrows, but grimly they swept on, and the Tatar ranks reeled to the shock. Suleiman, cutting a heron-plumed chieftain out of his saddle, shouted in exultation, but even as he did so, behind him rose a guttural roar, *"Ghar! ghar! ghar!* Smite, brothers, for the lord Timour!"

With a sob of rage he turned and saw his horsemen going down in windrows beneath the arrows of the Kalmucks. And in his ear he heard Donald MacDeesa laughing like a madman.

"Traitor!" screamed the Turk. "This is your work –" The claymore flashed in the sun and Prince Suleiman rolled headless from his saddle.

"One stroke for Nicopolis!" yelled the maddened Highlander. "Drive home your shafts, dog-brothers!"

The stocky Kalmucks yelped like wolves in reply, wheeling away to avoid the simitars of the desperate Turks, and driving their deadly arrows into the milling ranks at close range. They had endured much from their masters; now was the hour of reckoning. And now the Tatar right wing drove home with a roar; and caught before and behind, the Turkish cavalry buckled and crumpled, whole troops breaking away in headlong flight. At one stroke had been swept away Bayazid's chance to crush his enemy's formation.

As the charge had begun, the Turkish right wing had advanced with a great blare of trumpets and roll of drums, and in the midst of its feint, had been caught by the sudden unexpected charge of the Tatar left. Ak Boga had swept through the light spahis, and losing his head momentarily in the lust of slaughter, he drove them flying before him until pursued and pursuers vanished over the slopes in the distance.

Timour sent Prince Muhammad with a reserve squadron to support the left wing and bring it back, while Nur ad-Din, sweeping aside the remnants of Bayazid's cavalry, swung in a pivot-like movement and thundered against the locked ranks of the janizaries. They held like a wall of iron, and Ak Boga, galloping back from his pursuit of the spahis, smote them on the other flank. And now

Timour himself mounted his war-steed, and the center rolled like an iron wave against the staggering Turks. And now the real death-grip came to be.

Charge after charge crashed on those serried ranks, surging on and rolling back like onsweeping and receding waves. In clouds of fire-shot dust the janizaries stood unshaken, thrusting with reddened spears, smiting with dripping ax and notched simitar. The wild riders swept in like blasting whirlwinds, raking the ranks with the storms of their arrows as they drew and loosed too swiftly for the eye to follow, rushing headlong into the press, screaming and hacking like madmen as their simitars sheared through buckler, helmet and skull. And the Turks beat them back, overthrowing horse and rider; hacked them down and trampled them under, treading their own dead under foot to close the ranks, until both hosts trod on a carpet of the slain and the hoofs of the Tatar steeds splashed blood at every leap.

Repeated charges tore the Turkish host apart at last, and all over the plain the fight raged on, where clumps of spearmen stood back to back, slaying and dying beneath the arrows and simitars of the riders from the steppes. Through the clouds of rising dust stalked the elephants trumpeting like Doom, while the archers on their backs rained down blasts of arrows and sheets of fire that withered men in their mail like burnt grain.

All day Bayazid had fought grimly on foot at the head of his men. At his side fell King Peter, pierced by a score of arrows. With a thousand of his janizaries the Sultan held the highest hill upon the plain, and through the blazing hell of that long afternoon he held it still, while his men died beside him. In a hurricane of splintering spears, lashing axes and ripping simitars, the Sultan's warriors held the victorious Tatars to a gasping deadlock. And then Donald MacDeesa, on foot, eyes glaring like a mad dog's, rushed headlong through the mêlée and smote the Sultan with such hate-driven fury that the crested helmet shattered beneath the claymore's whistling edge and Bayazid fell like a dead man. And over the weary groups of blood-stained defenders rolled the dark tide, and the kettle-drums of the Tatars thundered victory.

VI

The searing glory which hath shone
  Amid the jewels of my throne,
Halo of Hell! and with a pain
  Not Hell shall make me fear again.

– *Poe*, Tamerlane

The power of the Osmanli was broken, the heads of the emirs heaped before Timour's tent. But the Tatars swept on; at the heels of the flying Turks they burst into Brusa, Bayazid's capital, sweeping the streets with sword and flame. Like a whirlwind they came and like a whirlwind they went, laden with treasures of the palace and the women of the vanished Sultan's seraglio.

Riding back to the Tatar camp beside Nur ad-Din and Ak Boga, Donald MacDeesa learned that Bayazid lived. The stroke which had felled him had only stunned, and the Turk was captive to the Amir he had mocked. MacDeesa cursed; the Gael was dusty and stained with hard riding and harder fighting; dried blood darkened his mail and clotted his scabbard mouth. A red-soaked scarf was bound about his thigh as a rude bandage; his eyes were blood-shot, his thin lips frozen in a snarl of battle-fury.

"By God, I had not thought a bullock could survive that blow. Is he to be crucified – as he swore to deal with Timour thus?"

"Timour gave him good welcome and will do him no hurt," answered the courtier who brought the news. "The Sultan will sit at the feast."

Ak Boga shook his head, for he was merciful except in the rush of battle, but in Donald's ears were ringing the screams of the butchered captives at Nicopolis, and he laughed shortly – a laugh that was not pleasant to hear.

To the fierce heart of the Sultan, death was easier than sitting a captive at the feast which always followed a Tatar victory. Bayazid sat like a grim image, neither speaking nor seeming to hear the crash of the kettle-drums, the roar of barbaric revelry. On his head

was the jewelled turban of sovereignty, in his hand the gem-starred scepter of his vanished empire.

He did not touch the great golden goblet before him. Many and many a time had he exulted over the agony of the vanquished, with much less mercy than was now shown him; now the unfamiliar bite of defeat left him frozen.

He stared at the beauties of his seraglio, who, according to Tatar custom, tremblingly served their new masters: black-haired Jewesses with slumberous, heavy-lidded eyes; lithe tawny Circassians and golden-haired Russians; dark-eyed Greek girls and Turkish women with figures like Juno – all naked as the day they were born, under the burning eyes of the Tatar lords.

He had sworn to ravish Timour's wives – the Sultan writhed as he saw the Despina, sister of Peter Lazarus and his favorite, nude like the rest, kneel and in quivering fear offer Timour a goblet of wine. The Tatar absently wove his fingers in her golden locks and Bayazid shuddered as if those fingers were locked in his own heart.

And he saw Donald MacDeesa sitting next to Timour, his stained dusty garments contrasting strangely with the silk-and-gold splendor of the Tatar lords – his savage eyes ablaze, his dark face wilder and more passionate than ever as he ate like a ravenous wolf and drained goblet after goblet of stinging wine. And Bayazid's iron control snapped. With a roar that struck the clamor dumb, the Thunderer lurched upright, breaking the heavy scepter like a twig between his hands and dashing the fragments to the floor.

All eyes turned toward him and some of the Tatars stepped quickly between him and their Amir, who only looked at him impassively.

"Dog and spawn of a dog!" roared Bayazid. "You came to me as one in need and I sheltered you! The curse of all traitors rest on your black heart!"

MacDeesa heaved up, scattered goblets and bowls.

"Traitors?" he yelled. "Is six years so long you forget the headless corpses that molder at Nicopolis? Have you forgotten the ten thousand captives you slew there, naked and with their hands bound? I fought you there with steel; and since I have fought you

with guile! Fool, from the hour you marched from Brusa, you were doomed! It was I who spoke softly to the Kalmucks, who hated you; so they were content and seemed willing to serve you. With them I communicated with Timour from the time we first left Angora – sending riders forth secretly or feigning to hunt for antelopes.

"Through me, Timour tricked you – even put into your head the plan of your battle! I caught you in a web of truths, knowing that you would follow your own course, regardless of what I or any one else said. I told you but two lies – when I said I sought revenge on Timour, and when I said the Amir would bide in the hills and fall upon us. Before battle joined I knew what Timour wished, and by my advice led you into a trap. So Timour, who had drawn out the plan you thought part yours and part mine, knew beforehand every move you would make. But in the end, it hinged on me, for it was I who turned the Kalmucks against you, and their arrows in the backs of your horsemen which tipped the scales when the battle hung in the balance.

"I paid high for my vengeance, Turk! I played my part under the eyes of your spies, in your court, every instant, even when my head was reeling with wine. I fought for you against the Greeks and took wounds. In the wilderness beyond the Halys I suffered with the rest. And I would have gone through greater hells to bring you to the dust!"

"Serve well your master as you have served me, traitor," retorted the Sultan. "In the end, Timour-il-leng, you will rue the day you took this adder into your naked hands. Aye, may each of you bring the other down to death!"

"Be at ease, Bayazid," said Timour impassively. "What is written, is written."

"Aye!" answered the Turk with a terrible laugh. "And it is not written that the Thunderer should live a buffoon for a crippled dog! Lame One, Bayazid gives you – hail and farewell!"

And before any could stay him, the Sultan snatched a carving-knife from a table and plunged it to the hilt in his throat. A moment he reeled like a mighty tree, spurting blood, and then crashed thunderously down. All noise was hushed as the multitude stood

aghast. A pitiful cry rang out as the young Despina ran forward, and dropping to her knees, drew the lion's head of her grim lord to her naked bosom, sobbing convulsively. But Timour stroked his beard measuredly and half abstractedly. And Donald MacDeesa, seating himself, took up a great goblet that glowed crimson in the torchlight, and drank deeply.

VII

> Hath not the same fierce heirdom given
> Rome to the Caesar – this to me?
>
> – *Poe*, Tamerlane

To understand the relationship of Donald MacDeesa to Timour, it is necessary to go back to that day, six years before, when in the turquoise-domed palace at Samarcand the Amir planned the overthrow of the Ottoman.

When other men looked days ahead, Timour looked years; and five years passed before he was ready to move against the Turk, and let Donald ride to Brusa ahead of a carefully trained pursuit. Five years of fierce fighting in the mountain snows and the desert dust, through which Timour moved like a mythical giant, and hard as he drove his chiefs, he drove the Highlander harder. It was as if he studied MacDeesa with the impersonally cruel eyes of a scientist, wringing every ounce of accomplishment from him, seeking to find the limit of man's endurance and valor – the final breaking-point. He did not find it.

The Gael was too utterly reckless to be trusted with hosts and armies. But in raids and forays, in the storming of cities, and in charges of battle, in any action requiring personal valor and prowess, the Highlander was all but invincible. He was a typical fighting-man of European wars, where tactics and strategy meant little and ferocious hand-to-hand fighting much, and where battles were decided by the physical prowess of the champions. In tricking the Turk, he had but followed the instructions given him by Timour.

There was scant love lost between the Gael and the Amir, to whom Donald was but a ferocious barbarian from the outlands of

Frankistan. Timour never showered gifts and honors on Donald, as he did upon his Moslem chiefs. But the grim Gael scorned these gauds, seeming to derive his only pleasures from hard fighting and hard drinking. He ignored the formal reverence paid the Amir by his subjects, and in his cups dared beard the somber Tatar to his face, so that the people caught their breath.

"He is a wolf I unleash on my foes," said Timour on one occasion to his lords.

"He is a two-edged blade that might cut the wielder," ventured one of them.

"Not so long as the blade is forever smiting my enemies," answered Timour.

After Angora, Timour gave Donald command of the Kalmucks, who accompanied their kin back into high Asia, and a swarm of restless, turbulent Vigurs. That was his reward: a wider range and a greater capacity for grinding toil and heart-bursting warfare. But Donald made no comment; he worked his slayers into fighting shape, and experimented with various types of saddles and armor, with firelocks – finding them much inferior in actual execution to the bows of the Tatars – and with the latest type of firearm, the cumbrous wheel-lock pistols used by the Arabs a century before they made their appearance in Europe.

Timour hurled Donald against his foes as a man hurls a javelin, little caring whether the weapon be broken or not. The Gael's horsemen would come back blood-stained, dusty and weary, their armor hacked to shreds, their swords notched and blunted, but always with the heads of Timour's foes swinging at their high saddle-peaks. Their savagery, and Donald's own wild ferocity and superhuman strength, brought them repeatedly out of seemingly hopeless positions. And Donald's wild-beast vitality caused him again and again to recover from ghastly wounds, until the iron-thewed Tatars marvelled at him.

As the years passed, Donald, always aloof and taciturn, withdrew more and more to himself. When not riding on campaigns, he sat alone in brooding silence in the taverns, or stalked dangerously through the streets, hand on his great sword, while the people slunk

softly from in front of him. He had one friend, Ak Boga; but one interest outside of war and carnage. On a raid into Persia, a slim white wisp of a girl had run screaming across the path of the charging squadron and his men had seen Donald bend down and sweep her up into his saddle with one mighty hand. The girl was Zuleika, a Persian dancer.

Donald had a house in Samarcand, and a handful of servants, but only this one girl. She was comely, sensual and giddy. She adored her master in her way, and feared him with a very ecstasy of fear, but was not above secret amours with young soldiers when MacDeesa was away on the wars. Like most Persian women of her caste, she had a capacity for petty intrigue and an inability for keeping her small nose out of affairs which were none of her business. She became a tale-bearer for Shadi Mulkh, the Persian paramour of Khalil, Timour's weak grandson, and thereby indirectly changed the destiny of the world. She was greedy, vain and an outrageous liar, but her hands were soft as drifting snow-flakes when she dressed the wounds of sword and spear on Donald's iron body. He never beat or cursed her, and though he never caressed or wooed her with gentle words as other men might, it was well known that he treasured her above all worldly possessions and honors.

Timour was growing old; he had played with the world as a man plays with a chessboard, using kings and armies for pawns. As a young chief without wealth or power, he had overthrown his Mongol masters, and mastered them in his turn. Tribe after tribe, race after race, kingdom after kingdom he had broken and molded into his growing empire, which stretched from the Gobi to the Mediterranean, from Moscow to Delhi – the mightiest empire the world ever knew. He had opened the doors of the South and East, and through them flowed the wealth of the earth. He had saved Europe from an Asiatic invasion, when he checked the tide of Turkish conquest – a fact of which he neither knew nor cared. He had built cities and he had destroyed cities. He had made the desert blossom like a garden, and he had turned flowering lands into desert. At his command pyramids of skulls had reared up, and lives flowed out like rivers. His helmeted war-lords were exalted above

the multitudes and nations cried out in vain beneath his grinding heel, like lost women crying in the mountains at night.

Now he looked eastward, where the purple empire of Cathay dreamed away the centuries. Perhaps, with the waning of life's tide, it was the old sleeping home-calling of his race; perhaps he remembered the ancient heroic khans, his ancestors, who had ridden southward out of the barren Gobi into the purple kingdoms.

The Grand Vizier shook his head, as he played at chess with his imperial master. He was old and weary, and he dared speak his mind even to Timour.

"My lord, of what avail these endless wars? You have already subjugated more nations than Genghis Khan or Alexander. Rest in the peace of your conquests and complete the work you have begun in Samarcand. Build more stately palaces. Bring here the philosophers, the artists, the poets of the world –"

Timour shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Philosophy and poetry and architecture are good enough in their way, but they are mist and smoke to conquest, for it is on the red splendor of conquest that all these things rest."

The Vizier played with the ivory pawns, shaking his hoary head.

"My lord, you are like two men – one a builder, the other a destroyer."

"Perhaps I destroy so that I may build on the ruins of my destruction," the Amir answered. "I have never sought to reason out this matter. I only know that I am a conqueror before I am a builder, and conquest is my life's blood."

"But what reason to overthrow this great weak bulk of Cathay?" protested the Vizier. "It will mean but more slaughter, with which you have already crimsoned the earth – more wo and misery, with helpless people dying like sheep beneath the sword."

Timour shook his head, half absently. "What are their lives? They die anyway, and their existence is full of misery. I will draw a band of iron about the heart of Tatary. With this Eastern conquest I will strengthen my throne, and kings of my dynasty shall rule the world for ten thousand years. All the roads of the world shall lead to Samarcand, and there shall be gathered the wonder and mystery

and glory of the world – colleges and libraries and stately mosques – marble domes and sapphire towers and turquoise minarets. But first I shall carry out my destiny – and that is Conquest!"

"But winter draws on," urged the Vizier. "At least wait until spring."

Timour shook his head, unspeaking. He knew he was old; even his iron frame was showing signs of decay. And sometimes in his sleep he heard the singing of Aljai the Dark-eyed, the bride of his youth, dead for more than forty years. So through the Blue City ran the word, and men left their love-making and their wine-bibbing, strung their bows, looked to their harness and took up again the worn old road of conquest.

Timour and his chiefs took with them many of their wives and servants, for the Amir intended to halt at Otrar, his border city, and from thence strike into Cathay when the snows melted in the spring. Such of his lords as remained rode with him – war took a heavy toll of Timour's hawks.

As usual Donald MacDeesa and his turbulent rogues led the advance. The Gael was glad to take the road after months of idleness, but he brought Zuleika with him. The years were growing more bitter for the giant Highlander, an outlander among alien races. His wild horsemen worshipped him in their savage way, but he was an alien among them, after all, and they could never understand his inmost thoughts. Ak Boga with his twinkling eyes and jovial laughter had been more like the men Donald had known in his youth, but Ak Boga was dead, his great heart stilled forever by the stroke of an Arab simitar, and in his growing loneliness Donald more and more sought solace in the Persian girl, who could never understand his strange wayward heart, but who somehow partly filled an aching void in his soul. Through the long lonely nights his hands sought her slim form with a dim formless unquiet hunger even she could dimly sense.

In a strange silence Timour rode out of Samarcand at the head of his long glittering columns and the people did not cheer as of old. With bowed heads and hearts crowded with emotions they could not define, they watched the last conqueror ride forth, and then

turned again to their petty lives and commonplace, dreary tasks, with a vague instinctive sense that something terrible and splendid and awesome had gone out of their lives forever.

In the teeth of the rising winter the hosts moved, not with the speed of other times when they passed through the land like wind-blown clouds. They were two hundred thousand strong and they bore with them herds of spare horses, wagons of supplies and great tent-pavilions.

Beyond the pass men call the Gates of Timour, snow fell, and into the teeth of the blizzard the army toiled doggedly. At last it became apparent that even Tatars could not march in such weather, and Prince Khalil went into winter quarters in that strange town called the Stone City, but Timour plunged on with his own troops. Ice lay three feet deep on the Syr when they crossed, and in the hill-country beyond the going became fiercer, and horses and camels stumbled through the drifts, the wagons lurching and rocking. But the will of Timour drove them grimly onward, and at last they came upon the plain and saw the spires of Otrar gleaming through the whirling snow-wrack.

Timour installed himself and his nobles in the palace, and his warriors went thankfully into winter quarters. But he sent for Donald MacDeesa.

“Ordushar lies in our road,” said Timour. “Take two thousand men and storm that city that our road be clear to Cathay with the coming of spring.”

When a man casts a javelin he little cares if it splinter on the mark. Timour would not have sent his valued emirs and chosen warriors on this, the maddest quest he had yet given even Donald. But the Gael cared not; he was more than ready to ride on any adventure which might drown the dim bitter dreams that gnawed deeper and deeper at his heart. At the age of forty MacDeesa’s iron frame was unweakened, his ferocious valor undimmed. But at times he felt old in his heart. His thoughts turned more and more back over the black and crimson pattern of his life with its violence and treachery and savagery; its wo and waste and stark futility. He slept fitfully and seemed to hear half-forgotten voices crying in the night.

Sometimes it seemed the keening of Highland pipes skirled through the howling winds.

He roused his wolves, who gaped at the command but obeyed without comment, and rode out of Otrar in a roaring blizzard. It was a venture of the damned.

In the palace of Otrar, Timour drowsed on his divan over his maps and charts, and listened drowsily to the everlasting disputes between the women of his household. The intrigues and jealousies of the Samarcand palaces reached to isolated Otrar. They buzzed about him, wearying him to death with their petty spite. As age stole on the iron Amir, the women looked eagerly to his naming of a successor – his queen Sarai Mulkh Khanum; Khan Zade, wife of his dead son Jahangir. Against the queen's claim for her son – and Timour's – Shah Ruhk, was opposed the intrigue of Khan Zade for her son, Prince Khalil, whom the courtezan Shadi Mulkh wrapped about her pink finger.

The Amir had brought Shadi Mulkh with him to Otrar, much against Khalil's will. The Prince was growing restless in the bleak Stone City and hints reached Timour of discord and threats of insubordination. Sarai Khanum came to the Amir, a gaunt weary woman, grown old in wars and grief.

"The Persian girl sends secret messages to Prince Khalil, stirring him up to deeds of folly," said the Great Lady. "You are far from Samarcand. Were Khalil to march thither before you – there are always fools ready to revolt, even against the Lord of Lords."

"At another time," said Timour wearily, "I would have her strangled. But Khalil in his folly would rise against me, and a revolt at this time, however quickly put down, would upset all my plans. Have her confined and closely guarded, so that she can send no more messages."

"This I have already done," replied Sarai Khanum grimly, "but she is clever and manages to get messages out of the palace by means of the Persian girl of the Caphar, lord Donald."

"Fetch this girl," ordered Timour, laying aside his maps with a sigh.

They dragged Zuleika before the Amir, who looked somberly upon her as she grovelled whimpering at his feet, and with a weary gesture, sealed her doom – and immediately forgot her, as a king forgets the fly he has crushed.

They dragged the girl screaming from the imperial presence and hurled her upon her knees in a hall which had no windows and only bolted doors. Grovelling on her knees she wailed frantically for Donald and screamed for mercy, until terror froze her voice in her pulsing throat, and through a mist of horror she saw the stark half-naked figure and the mask-like face of the grim executioner advancing, knife in hand.…

Zuleika was neither brave nor admirable. She neither lived with dignity nor met her fate with courage. She was cowardly, immoral and foolish. But even a fly loves life, and a worm would cry out under the heel that crushed it. And perhaps, in the grim inscrutable books of Fate, even an emperor may not forever trample insects with impunity.

VIII

But I have dreamed a dreary dream,
Beyond the Vale of Skye;
I saw a dead man win a fight,
And I think that man was I.

– Battle of Otterbourne

And at Ordushar the siege dragged on. In the freezing winds that swept down the pass, driving snow in blinding, biting blasts, the stocky Kalmucks and the lean Vigurs strove and suffered and died in bitter anguish. They set scaling-ladders against the walls and struggled upward, and the defenders, suffering no less, speared them, hurled down boulders that crushed the mailed figures like beetles, and thrust the ladders from the walls so that they crashed down, bearing death to men below. Ordushar was actually but a stronghold of the Jat Mongols, set sheer in the pass and flanked by towering cliffs.

Donald's wolves hacked at the frozen ground with frost-bitten raw hands which scarce could hold the picks, striving to sink a mine under the walls. They pecked at the towers while molten lead and weighted javelins fell in a rain upon them; driving their spear-points between the stones, tearing out pieces of masonry with their naked hands. With stupendous toil they had constructed makeshift siege-engines from felled trees and the leather of their harness and woven hair from the manes and tails of their war-horses. The rams battered vainly at the massive stones, the ballistas groaned as they launched tree-trunks and boulders against the towers or over the walls. Along the parapets the attackers fought with the defenders, until their bleeding hands froze to spear-shaft and sword-hilt, and the skin came away in great raw strips. And always, with superhuman fury rising above their agony, the defenders hurled back the attack.

A storming-tower was built and rolled up to the walls, and from the battlements the men of Ordushar poured a drenching torrent of naphtha that sent it up in flame and burnt the men in it, shriveling them in their armor like beetles in a fire. Snow and sleet fell in

blinding flurries, freezing to sheets of ice. Dead men froze stiffly where they fell, and wounded men died in their sleeping-furs. There was no rest, no surcease from agony. Days and nights merged into a hell of pain. Donald's men, with tears of suffering frozen on their faces, beat frenziedly against the frosty stone walls, fought with raw hands gripping broken weapons, and died cursing the gods that created them.

The misery inside the city was no less, for there was no more food. At night Donald's warriors heard the wailing of the starving people in the streets. At last in desperation the men of Ordushar cut the throats of their women and children and sallied forth, and the haggard Tatars fell on them weeping with the madness of rage and wo, and in a welter of battle that crimsoned the frozen snow, drove them back through the city gates. And the struggle went hideously on.

Donald used up the last wood in the vicinity to erect another storming-tower higher than the city-wall. After that there was no more wood for the fires. He himself stood at the uplifted bridge which was to be lowered to rest on the parapets. He had not spared himself. Day and night he had toiled beside his men, suffering as they had suffered. The tower was rolled to the wall in a hail of arrows that slew half the warriors who had not found shelter behind the thick bulwark. A crude cannon bellowed from the walls, but the clumsy round shot whistled over their heads. The naphtha and Greek fire of the Jats was exhausted. In the teeth of the singing shafts the bridge was dropped.

Drawing his claymore, Donald strode out upon it. Arrows broke on his corselet and glanced from his helmet. Firelocks flashed and bellowed in his face but he strode on unhurt. Lean armored men with eyes like mad dogs' swarmed upon the parapet, seeking to dislodge the bridge, to hack it asunder. Among them Donald sprang, his claymore whistling. The great blade sheared through mail-mesh, flesh and bone, and the struggling clump fell apart. Donald staggered on the edge of the wall as a heavy ax crashed on his shield, and he struck back, cleaving the wielder's spine. The Gael recovered his balance, tossing away his riven shield. His wolves

were swarming over the bridge behind him, hurling the defenders from the parapet, cutting them down. Into a swirl of battle Donald strode, swinging his heavy blade. He thought fleetingly of Zuleika, as men in the madness of battle will think of irrelevant things, and it was as if the thought of her had hurt him fiercely under the heart. But it was a spear that had girded through his mail, and Donald struck back savagely; the claymore splintered in his hand and he leaned against the parapet, his face briefly contorted. Around him swept the tides of slaughter as the pent-up fury of his warriors, maddened by the long weeks of suffering, burst all bounds.

IX

> While the red flashing of the light
> From clouds that hung, like banners, o'er,
> Appeared to my half-closing eye
> The pageantry of monarchy.
>
> – *Poe*, Tamerlane

To Timour on his throne in the palace of Otrar came the Grand Vizier. "The survivors of the men sent to the Pass of Ordushar are returning, my lord. The city in the mountains is no more. They bear the lord Donald on a litter, and he is dying."

They brought the litter into Timour's presence, weary, dull-eyed men, with raw wounds tied up with blood-crusted rags, their garments and mail in tatters. They flung before the Amir's feet the golden-scaled corselets of chiefs, and chests of jewels and robes of silk and silver braid; the loot of Ordushar where men had starved among riches. And they set the litter down before Timour.

The Amir looked at the form of Donald. The Highlander was pale, but his sinister face showed no hint of weakness in that wild spirit, his cold eyes gleamed unquenched.

"The road to Cathay is clear," said Donald, speaking with difficulty. "Ordushar lies in smoking ruins. I have carried out your last command."

Timour nodded, his eyes seeming to gaze through and beyond the Highlander. What was a dying man on a litter to the Amir, who had

seen so many die? His mind was on the road to Cathay and the purple kingdoms beyond. The javelin had shattered at last, but its final cast had opened the imperial path. Timour's dark eyes burned with strange depths and leaping shadows, as the old fire stole through his blood. Conquest! Outside the winds howled, as if trumpeting the roar of nakars, the clash of cymbals, the deep-throated chant of victory.

"Send Zuleika to me," the dying man muttered. Timour did not reply; he scarcely heard, sitting lost in thunderous visions. He had already forgotten Zuleika and her fate. What was one death in the awesome and terrible scheme of empire.

"Zuleika, where is Zuleika?" the Gael repeated, moving restlessly on his litter. Timour shook himself slightly and lifted his head, remembering.

"I had her put to death," he answered quietly. "It was necessary."

"Necessary!" Donald strove to rear upright, his eyes terrible, but fell back, gagging, and spat out a mouthful of crimson. "You bloody dog, she was mine!"

"Yours or another's," Timour rejoined absently, his mind far away. "What is a woman in the plan of imperial destinies?"

For answer Donald plucked a pistol from among his robes and fired point-blank. Timour started and swayed on his throne, and the courtiers cried out, paralyzed with horror. Through the drifting smoke they saw that Donald lay dead on the litter, his thin lips frozen in a grim smile. Timour sat crumpled on his throne, one hand gripping his breast; through those fingers blood oozed darkly. With his free hand he waved back his nobles.

"Enough; it is finished. To every man comes the end of the road. Let Pir Muhammad reign in my stead, and let him strengthen the lines of the empire I have reared with my hands."

A rack of agony twisted his features. "Allah, that this should be the end of empire!" It was a fierce cry of anguish from his inmost soul. "That I, who have trodden upon kingdoms and humbled sultans, come to my doom because of a cringing trull and a Caphar renegade!" His helpless chiefs saw his mighty hands clench like iron as he held death at bay by the sheer power of his unconquered will.

The fatalism of his accepted creed had never found resting-place in his instinctively pagan soul; he was a fighter to the red end.

"Let not my people know that Timour died by the hand of a Caphar," he spoke with growing difficulty. "Let not the chronicles of the ages blazon the name of a wolf that slew an emperor. Ah God, that a bit of dust and metal can dash the Conqueror of the World into the dark! Write, scribe, that this day, by the hand of no man, but by the will of Allah, died Timour, Servant of God."

The chiefs stood about in dazed silence, while the pallid scribe took up parchment and wrote with a shaking hand. Timour's somber eyes were fixed on Donald's still features that seemed to give back his stare, as the dead on the litter faced the dying on the throne. And before the scratching of the quill had ceased, Timour's lion head had sunk upon his mighty chest. And without the wind howled a dirge, drifting the snow higher and higher about the walls of Otrar, even as the sands of oblivion drifted already about the crumbling empire of Timour, the Last Conqueror, Lord of the World.

OceanofPDF.com

Timur-Lang

The warm wind blows through the waving grain –
Where are the glories of Tamerlane?
The nations stood up, ripe and tall –
He was the sickle that reaped them all.
But the sickle shatters and leaves no trace –
And the grain grows green on the desert's face.

OceanofPDF.com

A Song of the Naked Lands

You lolled in gardens where breezes fanned
  The blossom's shivering shard;
But we were bred in a naked land
  Where life was bitter hard.

You raped the grapes of their purple soul
  For your wine cups brimming high;
We stooped to the dregs of the muddy hole
  That was bitter with alkali.

And you grew flabby and round of limb,
  Short of nerve and breath;
But we grew rugged and lean and grim
  In our naked grip with Death.

Silk was too harsh for your dainty skin,
  Red wine too poor for your drought;
We hunted the holes that the rain stood in,
  And stripped the wolf for our clout.

Round were your bellies, soft your hand,
  Soft with the fat of earth;
Yours was the wealth of a smiling land,
  Ours the desert's dearth.

You sang beneath the locust tree,
  Forgetful of hunger and hate:
"It has always been, it will always be!" –
  Even then we were at your gate.

You lolled by fountain and golden hall
  Until that frenzied morn
When we burst the gates and breached the wall
  And cut you down like corn.

We reaped the yield and we plowed the field

With red and dripping shares,
And you could not fight and you could not run,
You could only die like hares.

Grim was the barter, red the trade,
With dripping swords for coins,
And your women screamed in the trampled sand
With bruised and bleeding loins.

Skilled was the brain and skilled the hand
That shaped the stubborn stone,
But the brain spilled on the bloody sand
When iron split the bone.

The hand that traced the gilded frieze,
That scrolled the written page,
It could not turn the driven steel,
Backed by the primal rage.

Of what avail the harp and lute,
Gemmed girdle and purple cloak,
When the dripping axe was smiting home
In the flame and the blinding smoke?

Blood smeared your satin and silk and lace.
You heard your children moan,
And your elders howled in the market place
Where we stripped them skin from bone.

And where your bearded judges sat
And bade men live or die,
A naked slayer roared and waved
A bloody scalp on high.

Over the ruins arched and spired
The billowing smoke cloud waves;
And you who lived when the sword was tired,
You live but as our slaves.

Our hard hands clutch your golden cups,
  Our rough feet crush your flowers;
We stable our horses in your halls,
  And all your wealth is ours.

We have doffed our wolfskin clouts for silks,
  We wear them clumsily,
Our eyes are bleak, our beards unshorn,
  Our matted locks stream free.

But our sons will trim their beards and hair,
  Don cloaks of crimson hue;
They will take your daughters to their beds,
  Till they grow soft as you.

They will trade their freedom for harps and lutes,
  Discard the bow and the dart;
They will build a prison of satin and gold,
  And call it Culture and Art.

They will lie in the lap of a smiling land,
  Till its rusts unman and rot them,
And they scorn their blood, and the calloused hand,
  And the fathers who begot them.

But our brothers still dwell in the sun-seared waste
  And their sons are hard and lank;
They will hunt the wolf-pack that we chased,
  And drink the water we drank.

The hungers we knew they too will know,
  The scars of fangs and of briars;
In the rocks where they crouch when the sandstorms blow
  They will find the marks of our fires.

They will know the hungers that once we had,
  While the stream of centuries runs,
Till they burst from the desert, hunger-mad,

To slaughter our slothful sons.

OceanofPDF.com

The Shadow of the Vulture

"Are the dogs dressed and gorged?"

"Aye, Protector of the Faithful."

"Then let them crawl into the Presence."

So they brought the envoys, pallid from months of imprisonment, before the canopied throne of Suleyman the Magnificent, Sultan of Turkey, and the mightiest monarch in an age of mighty monarchs. Under the great purple dome of the royal chamber gleamed the throne before which the world trembled – gold-panelled, pearl-inlaid. An emperor's wealth in gems was sewn into the silken canopy from which depended a shimmering string of pearls ending a frieze of emeralds which hung like a halo of glory above Suleyman's head. Yet the splendor of the throne was paled by the glitter of the figure upon it, bedecked in jewels, the aigret feather rising above the diamonded white turban. About the throne stood his nine viziers, in attitudes of humility, and warriors of the imperial bodyguard ranged the dais – Solaks in armor, black and white and scarlet plumes nodding above the gilded helmets.

The envoys from Austria were properly impressed – the more so as they had had nine weary months for reflection in the grim Castle of the Seven Towers that overlooks the Sea of Marmora. The head of the embassy choked down his choler and cloaked his resentment in a semblance of submission – a strange cloak on the shoulders of Habordansky, general of Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria. His rugged head bristled incongruously from the flaming silk robes presented him by the contemptuous Sultan, as he was brought before the throne, his arms gripped fast by stalwart Janizaries. Thus were foreign envoys presented to the sultans, ever since that red day by Kossova when Milosh Kabilovitch, knight of slaughtered Serbia, had slain the conqueror Murad with a hidden dagger.

The Grand Turk regarded Habordansky with scant favor. Suleyman was a tall, slender man, with a thin down-curving nose and a thin straight mouth, the resolution of which his drooping mustachios did not soften. His narrow outward-curving chin was shaven. The only suggestion of weakness was in the slender,

remarkably long neck, but that suggestion was belied by the hard lines of the slender figure, the glitter of the dark eyes. There was more than a suggestion of the Tatar about him – rightly so, since he was no more the son of Selim the Grim, than of Hafsza Khatun, princess of Crimea. Born to the purple, heir to the mightiest military power in the world, he was crested with authority and cloaked in pride that recognized no peer beneath the gods.

Under his eagle gaze old Habordansky bent his head to hide the sullen rage in his eyes. Nine months before, the general had come to Stamboul representing his master, the Archduke, with proposals for truce and the disposition of the iron crown of Hungary, torn from the dead king Louis' head on the bloody field of Mohacz, where the Grand Turk's armies opened the road to Europe. There had been another emissary before him – Jerome Lasczky, the Polish count palatine. Habordansky, with the bluntness of his breed, had claimed the Hungarian crown for his master, rousing Suleyman's ire. Lasczky had, like a suppliant, asked on his bended knees that crown for his countrymen at Mohacz.

To Lasczky had been given honor, gold and promises of patronage, for which he had paid with pledges abhorrent even to his avaricious soul – selling his ally's subjects into slavery, and opening the road through the subject territory to the very heart of Christendom.

All this was made known to Habordansky, frothing with fury in the prison to which the arrogant resentment of the Sultan had assigned him. Now Suleyman looked contemptuously at the staunch old general, and dispensed with the usual formality of speaking through the mouthpiece of the Grand Vizier. A royal Turk would not deign to admit knowledge of any Frankish tongue, but Habordansky understood Turki. The Sultan's remarks were brief and without preamble.

"Say to your master that I now make ready to visit him in his own lands, and that if he fails to meet me at Mohacz or at Pesth, I will meet him beneath the walls of Vienna."

Habordansky bowed, not trusting himself to speak. At a scornful wave of the imperial hand, an officer of the court came forward and

bestowed upon the general a small gilded bag containing two hundred ducats. Each member of his retinue, waiting patiently at the other end of the chamber, under the spears of the Janizaries, was likewise so guerdoned. Habordansky mumbled thanks, his knotty hands clenched about the gift with unnecessary vigor. The Sultan grinned thinly, well aware that the ambassador would have hurled the coins into his face, had he dared. He half-lifted his hand, in token of dismissal, then paused, his eyes resting on the group of men who composed the general's suite – or rather, on one of these men. This man was the tallest in the room, strongly built, wearing his Turkish gift-garments clumsily. At a gesture from the Sultan he was brought forward in the grasp of the soldiers.

Suleyman stared at him narrowly. The Turkish vest and voluminous khalat could not conceal the lines of massive strength. His tawny hair was close-cropped, his sweeping yellow mustaches drooping below a stubborn chin. His blue eyes seemed strangely clouded; it was as if the man slept on his feet, with his eyes open.

"Do you speak Turki?" The Sultan did the fellow the stupendous honor of addressing him directly. Through all the pomp of the Ottoman court there remained in the Sultan some of the simplicity of Tatar ancestors.

"Yes, your majesty," answered the Frank.

"Who are you?"

"Men name me Gottfried von Kalmbach."

Suleyman scowled and unconsciously his fingers wandered to his shoulder, where, under his silken robes, he could feel the outlines of an old scar.

"I do not forget faces. Somewhere I have seen yours – under circumstances that etched it into the back of my mind. But I am unable to recall those circumstances."

"I was at Rhodes," offered the German.

"Many men were at Rhodes," snapped Suleyman.

"Aye," agreed von Kalmbach tranquilly. "De l'Isle Adam was there."

Suleyman stiffened and his eyes glittered at the name of the Grand Master of the Knights of Saint John, whose desperate defense

of Rhodes had cost the Turk sixty thousand men. He decided, however, that the Frank was not clever enough for the remark to carry any subtle thrust, and dismissed the embassy with a wave. The envoys were backed out of the Presence and the incident was closed. The Franks would be escorted out of Stamboul, and to the nearest boundaries of the empire. The Turk's warning would be carried post-haste to the Archduke, and soon on the heels of that warning would come the armies of the Sublime Porte. Suleyman's officers knew that the Grand Turk had more in mind than merely establishing his puppet Zapolya on the conquered Hungarian throne. Suleyman's ambitions embraced all Europe – that stubborn Frankistan which had for centuries sporadically poured forth hordes chanting and pillaging into the East, whose illogical and wayward peoples had again and again seemed ripe for Moslem conquest, yet who had always emerged, if not victorious, at least unconquered.

It was the evening of the morning on which the Austrian emissaries departed that Suleyman, brooding on his throne, raised his lean head and beckoned his Grand Vizier Ibrahim, who approached with confidence. The Grand Vizier was always sure of his master's approbation; was he not cup-companion and boyhood comrade of the Sultan? Ibrahim had but one rival in his master's favor – the red-haired Russian girl, Khurrem the Joyous, whom Europe knew as Roxelana, whom slavers had dragged from her father's house in Rogatino to be the Sultan's harim favorite.

"I remember the infidel at last," said Suleyman. "Do you recall the first charge of the knights at Mohacz?"

Ibrahim winced slightly at the allusion.

"Oh, Protector of the Pitiful, is it likely that I should forget an occasion on which the divine blood of my master was spilt by an unbeliever?"

"Then you remember that thirty-two knights, the paladins of the Nazarenes, drove headlong into our array, each having pledged his life to cut down our person. By Allah, they rode like men riding to a wedding, their great horses and long lances overthrowing all who

opposed them, and their plate-armor turned the finest steel. Yet they fell as the firelocks spoke until only three were left in the saddle – the knight Marczali and two companions. These paladins cut down my Solaks like ripe grain, but Marczali and one of his companions fell – almost at my feet.

"Yet one knight remained, though his vizored helmet had been torn from his head and blood started from every joint in his armor. He rode full at me, swinging his great two-handed sword, and I swear by the beard of the Prophet, death was so nigh me that I felt the burning breath of Azrael on my neck!

"His sword flashed like lightning in the sky, and glancing from my casque, whereby I was half-stunned so that blood gushed from my nose, rent the mail on my shoulder and gave me this wound, which irks me yet when the rains come. The Janizaries who swarmed around him cut the hocks of his horse, which brought him to earth as it went down, and the remnants of my Solaks bore me back out of the mêlée. Then the Hungarian host came on, and I saw not what became of the knight. But today I saw him again."

Ibrahim started with an exclamation of incredulity.

"Nay, I could not mistake those blue eyes. How it is I know not, but the knight that wounded me at Mohacz was this German, Gottfried von Kalmbach."

"But, Defender of the Faith," protested Ibrahim, "the heads of those dog-knights were heaped before thy royal pavilion –"

"And I counted them and said nothing at the time, lest men think I held thee in blame," answered Suleyman. "There were but thirty-one. Most were so mutilated I could tell little of the features. But somehow the infidel escaped, who gave me this blow. I love brave men, but our blood is not so common that an unbeliever may with impunity spill it on the ground for the dogs to lap up. See ye to it."

Ibrahim salaamed deeply and withdrew. He made his way through broad corridors to a blue-tiled chamber whose gold-arched windows looked out on broad galleries, shaded by cypress and plane-trees, and cooled by the spray of silvery fountains. There at his summons came one Yaruk Khan, a Crim Tatar, a slant-eyed

impassive figure in harness of lacquered leather and burnished bronze.

"Dog-brother," said the Vizier, "did thy koumiss-clouded gaze mark the tall German lord who served the emir Habordansky – the lord whose hair is tawny as a lion's mane?"

"Aye, noyon, he who is called Gombuk."

"The same. Take a chambul of thy dog-brothers and go after the Franks. Bring back this man and thou shalt be rewarded. The persons of envoys are sacred, but this matter is not official," he added cynically.

"To hear is to obey!" With a salaam as profound as that accorded to the Sultan himself, Yaruk Khan backed out of the presence of the second man of the empire.

He returned some days later, dusty, travel-stained, and without his prey. On him Ibrahim bent an eye full of menace, and the Tatar prostrated himself before the silken cushions on which the Grand Vizier sat, in the blue chamber with the gold-arched windows.

"Great khan, let not thine anger consume thy slave. The fault was not mine, by the beard of the Prophet."

"Squat on thy mangy haunches and bay out the tale," ordered Ibrahim considerately.

"Thus it was, my lord," began Yaruk Khan. "I rode swiftly, and though the Franks and their escort had a long start, and pushed on through the night without halting, I came up with them the next midday. But lo, Gombuk was not among them, and when I inquired after him, the paladin Habordansky replied only with many great oaths, like to the roaring of a cannon. So I spoke with various of the escort who understood the speech of these infidels, and learned what had come to pass. Yet I would have my lord remember that I only repeat the words of the Spahis of the escort, who are men without honor and lie like –"

"Like a Tatar," said Ibrahim.

Yaruk Khan acknowledged the compliment with a wide dog-like grin, and continued, "This they told me. At dawn Gombuk drew

horse away from the rest, and the emir Habordansky demanded of him the reason. Then Gombuk laughed in the manner of the Franks – huh! huh! huh! – so. And Gombuk said, 'The devil of good your service has done me, so I cool my heels for nine months in a Turkish prison. Suleyman has given us safe conduct over the border and I am not compelled to ride with you.' 'You dog,' said the emir, 'there is war in the wind and the Archduke has need of your sword.' 'Devil eat the Archduke,' answered Gombuk; 'Zapolya is a dog because he stood aside at Mohacz, and let us, his comrades, be cut to pieces, but Ferdinand is a dog too. When I am penniless I sell him my sword. Now I have two hundred ducats and these robes which I can sell to any Jew for a handful of silver, and may the devil bite me if I draw sword for any man while I have a penny left. I'm for the nearest Christian tavern, and you and the Archduke may go to the devil.' Then the emir cursed him with many great curses, and Gombuk rode away laughing, huh! huh! huh!, and singing a song about a cockroach named –"

"Enough!" Ibrahim's features were dark with rage. He plucked savagely at his beard, reflecting that in the allusion to Mohacz, von Kalmbach had practically clinched Suleyman's suspicion. That matter of thirty-one heads when there should have been thirty-two was something no Turkish sultan would be likely to overlook. Officials had lost positions and their own heads over more trivial matters. The manner in which Suleyman had acted showed his almost incredible fondness and consideration for his Grand Vizier, but Ibrahim, vain though he was, was shrewd and wished no slightest shadow to come between him and his sovereign.

"Could you not have tracked him down, dog?" he demanded.

"By Allah," swore the uneasy Tatar, "he must have ridden on the wind. He crossed the border hours ahead of me, and I followed him as far as I dared –"

"Enough of excuses," interrupted Ibrahim. "Send Mikhal Oglu to me." The Tatar departed thankfully. Ibrahim was not tolerant of failure in any man.

The Grand Vizier brooded on his silken cushions until the shadow of a pair of vulture wings fell across the marble-tiled floor, and the lean figure he had summoned bowed before him. The man whose very name was a shuddering watchword of horror to all western Asia was soft-spoken and moved with the mincing ease of a cat, but the stark evil of his soul showed in his dark countenance, gleamed in his narrow slit eyes. He was the chief of the Akinji, those wild riders whose raids spread fear and desolation throughout all lands beyond the Grand Turk's borders. He stood in full armor, a jeweled helmet on his narrow head, the wide vulture wings made fast to the shoulders of his gilded chain-mail hauberk. Those wings spread wide in the wind when he rode, and under their pinions lay the shadows of death and destruction. It was Suleyman's simitar-tip, the most noted slayer of a nation of slayers, who stood before the Grand Vizier.

"Soon you will precede the hosts of our master into the lands of the infidel," said Ibrahim. "It will be your order, as always, to strike and spare not. You will waste the fields and the vineyards of the Caphars, you will burn their villages, you will strike down their men with arrows, and lead away their wenches captive. Lands beyond our line of march will cry out beneath your heel."

"That is good hearing, Favored of Allah," answered Mikhal Oglu in his soft courteous voice.

"Yet there is an order within the order," continued Ibrahim, fixing a piercing eye on the Akinji. "You know the German, von Kalmbach?"

"Aye – Gombuk as the Tatars call him."

"So. This is my command – whoever fights or flees, lives or dies – this man must not live. Search him out wherever he lies, though the hunt carry you to the very banks of the Rhine. When you bring me his head, your reward shall be thrice its weight in gold."

"To hear is to obey, my lord. Men say he is the vagabond son of a noble German family, whose ruin has been wine and women. They say he was once a Knight of Saint John, until cast forth for guzzling and –"

“Yet do not underrate him,” answered Ibrahim grimly. “Sot he may be, but if he rode with Marczali, he is not to be despised. See thou to it!”

“There is no den where he can hide from me, oh Favored of Allah,” declared Mikhal Oglu, “no night dark enough to conceal him, no forest thick enough. If I bring you not his head, I give him leave to send you mine.”

“Enough!” Ibrahim grinned and tugged at his beard, well pleased. “You have my leave to go.”

The sinister vulture-winged figure went springily and silently from the blue chamber, nor could Ibrahim guess that he was taking the first steps in a feud which should spread over years and far lands, swirling in dark tides to draw in thrones and kingdoms and red-haired women more beautiful than the flames of hell.

II

In a small thatched hut in a village not far from the Danube, lusty snores resounded where a figure reclined in state on a ragged cloak thrown over a heap of straw. It was the paladin Gottfried von Kalmbach who slept the sleep of innocence and ale. The velvet vest, voluminous silken trousers, khalat and shagreen boots, gifts from a contemptuous sultan, were nowhere in evidence. The paladin was clad in worn leather and rusty mail. Hands tugged at him, breaking his sleep, and he swore drowsily.

“Wake up, my lord! Oh, wake, good knight – good pig – good dog-soul – will you wake, then?”

“Fill my flagon, host,” mumbled the slumberer. “Who? – what? May the dogs bite you, Ivga! I’ve not another asper – not a penny. Go off like a good lass and let me sleep.”

The girl renewed her tugging and shaking.

“Oh dolt! Rise! Gird on your spit! There are happenings forward!”

“Ivga,” muttered Gottfried, pulling away from her attack, “take my burganet to the Jew. He’ll give you enough for it to get drunk again.”

“Fool!” she cried in despair. “It isn’t money I want! The whole east is aflame, and none knows the reason thereof!”

“Has the rain ceased?” asked von Kalmbach, taking some interest in the proceedings at last.

“The rain ceased hours ago. You can only hear the drip from the thatch. Put on your sword and come out into the street. The men of the village are all drunk on your last silver, and the women know not what to think or do. Ah!”

The exclamation was broken from her by the sudden upleaping of a weird illumination which shone through the crevices of the hut. The German got unsteadily to his feet, quickly girt on the great two-handed sword and stuck his dented burganet on his cropped locks. Then he followed the girl into the straggling street. She was a slender young thing, barefooted, clad only in a short tunic-like garment, through the wide rents of which gleamed generous expanses of white flesh.

There seemed no life or movement in the village. Nowhere showed a light. Water dripped steadily from the eaves of the thatched-roofs. Puddles in the muddy streets gleamed black. Wind sighed and moaned eerily through the black sodden branches of the trees which pressed in bulwarks of darkness about the little village, and in the southeast, towering higher into the leaden sky, rose the lurid crimson glow that set the dank clouds to smoldering. The girl Ivga cringed close to the tall German, whimpering.

“I’ll tell you what it is, my girl,” said he, scanning the glow. “It’s Suleyman’s devils. They’ve crossed the river and they’re burning the villages. Aye, I’ve seen glares like that in the sky before. I’ve expected him before now, but these cursed rains we’ve had for weeks must have held him back. Aye, it’s the Akinji, right enough, and they won’t stop this side of Vienna. Look you, my girl, go quickly and quietly to the stable behind the hut and bring me my gray stallion. We’ll slip out like mice from between the devil’s fingers. The stallion will carry us both, easily.”

“But the people of the village!” she sobbed, wringing her hands.

“Eh, well,” he said, “God rest them; the men have drunk my ale valiantly and the women have been kind – but horns of Satan, girl,

the gray nag won't carry a whole village!"

"Go you!" she returned. "I'll stay and die with my people!"

"The Turks won't kill you," he answered. "They'll sell you to a fat old Stamboul merchant who'll beat you. I won't stay to be cut open, and neither shall you –"

A terrible scream from the girl cut him short and he wheeled at the awful terror in her flaring eyes. Even as he did so, a hut at the lower end of the village sprang into flames, the sodden material burning slowly. A medley of screams and maddened yells followed the cry of the girl. In the sluggish light figures danced and capered wildly. Gottfried, straining his eyes in the shadows, saw shapes swarming over the low mud wall which drunkenness and negligence had left unguarded.

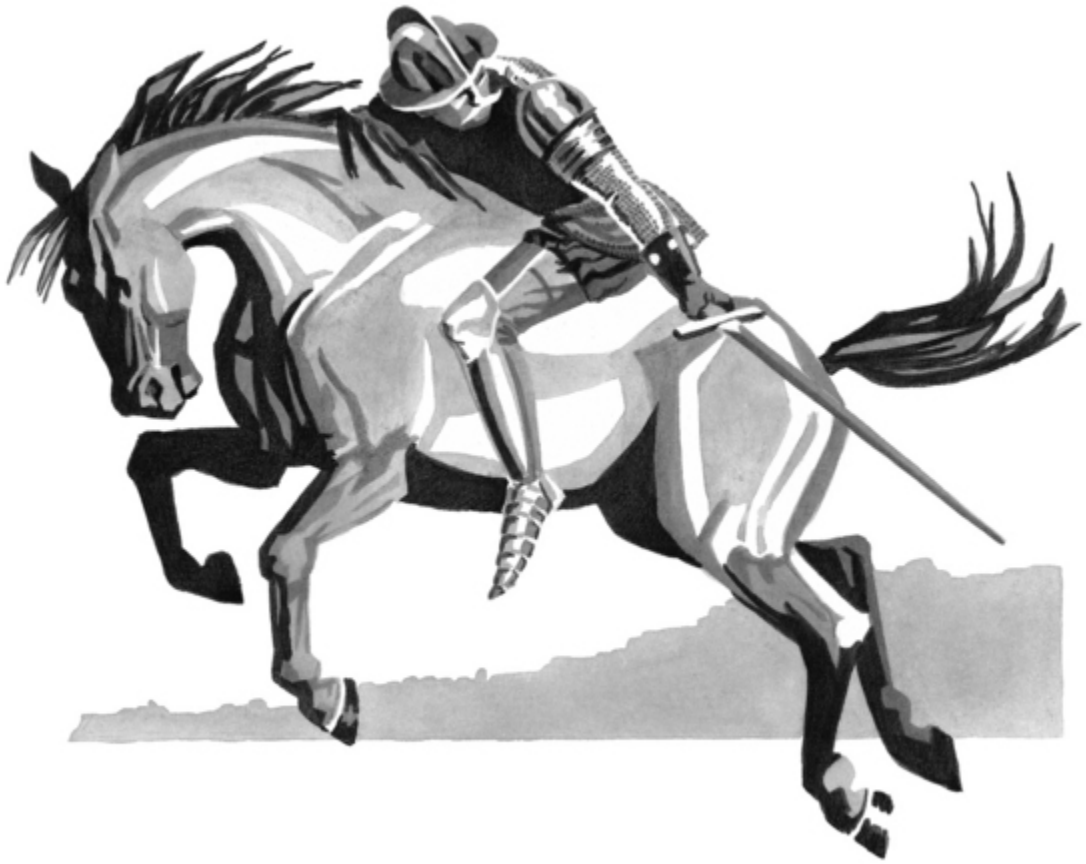
"Damnation!" he muttered. "The accursed ones have ridden ahead of their fire. They've stolen on the village in the dark – come on, girl –"

But even as he caught her white wrist to drag her away, and she screamed and fought against him like a wild thing, mad with fear, the mud wall crashed at the point nearest them. It crumpled under the impact of a score of horses, and into the doomed village reined the riders, distinct in the growing light. Huts were flaring up on all hands, screams rising to the dripping clouds as the invaders dragged shrieking women and drunken men from their hovels and cut their throats. Gottfried saw the lean figures of the horsemen, the firelight gleaming on their burnished steel; he saw the vulture wings on the shoulders of the foremost. Even as he recognized Mikhal Oglu, he saw the chief stiffen and point.

"At him, dogs!" yelled the Akinji, his voice no longer soft, but strident as the rasp of a drawn saber. "It is Gombuk! Five hundred aspers to the man who brings me his head!"

With a curse von Kalmbach bounded for the shadows of the nearest hut, dragging the screaming girl with him. Even as he leaped, he heard the twang of bowstrings, and the girl sobbed and went limp in his grasp. She sank down at his feet, and in the lurid glare he saw the feathered end of an arrow quivering under her heart. With a low rumble he turned toward his assailants as a fierce

bear turns at bay. An instant he stood, head out-thrust truculently, sword gripped in both hands; then, as a bear gives back from the onset of the hunters, he turned and fled about the hut, arrows whistling about him and glancing from the rings of his mail. There were no shots; the ride through that dripping forest had dampened the powder-flasks of the raiders.



Von Kalmbach quartered about the back of the hut, mindful of the fierce yells behind him, and gained the shed behind the hut he had occupied, wherein he stabled his gray stallion. Even as he reached the door, some one snarled like a panther in the semi-dark and cut viciously at him. He parried the stroke with the lifted sword and struck back with all the power of his broad shoulders. The great blade glanced stunningly from the Akinji's polished helmet and rent through the mail links of his hauberk, tearing arm from shoulder.

The Muhammadan sank down with a groan, and the German sprang over his prostrate form. The gray stallion, wild with fear and excitement, neighed shrilly and reared as his master sprang on his back. No time for saddle or bridle. Gottfried dug his heels into the quivering flanks and the great steed shot through the door like a thunderbolt, knocking men right and left like tenpins. Across the firelit open space between the burning huts he raced, clearing crumpled corpses in his stride, splashing his rider from heel to head as he thrashed through the puddles.

The Akinji made after the flying rider, loosing their shafts and giving tongue like hounds. Those mounted spurred after him, while those who had entered the village on foot ran through the broken wall for their horses.

Arrows flickered about Gottfried's head as he put his steed at the only point open to him – the unbroken western wall. It was touch and go, for the footing was tricky and treacherous and never had the gray stallion attempted such a leap. Gottfried held his breath as he felt the great body beneath him gathering and tensing in full flight for the desperate effort; then with a volcanic heave of mighty thews the stallion rose in the air and cleared the barrier with scarce an inch to spare. The pursuers yelled in amazement and fury, and reined back. Born horsemen though they were, they dared not attempt that break-neck leap. They lost time seeking gates and breaks in the wall, and when they finally emerged from the village, the black, dank, whispering, dripping forest had swallowed up their prey.

Mikhal Oglu swore like a fiend and leaving his lieutenant Othman in charge with instructions to leave no living human being in the village, he pressed on after the fugitive, following the trail, by torches, in the muddy mold, and swearing to run him down, if the road led under the very walls of Vienna.

III

Allah did not will it that Mikhal Oglu should take Gottfried von Kalmbach's head in the dark, dripping forest. He knew the country

better than they, and in spite of their zeal, they lost his trail in the darkness. Dawn found Gottfried riding through terror-stricken farmlands, with the flame of a burning world lighting the east and south. The country was thronged with fugitives, staggering under pitiful loads of household goods, driving bellowing cattle, like people fleeing the end of the world. The torrential rains that had offered false promise of security had not long stayed the march of the Grand Turk.

With a quarter-million followers he was ravaging the eastern marches of Christendom. While Gottfried had loitered in the taverns of isolated villages, drinking up the Sultan's bounty, Pesth and Buda had fallen, the German soldiers of the latter having been slaughtered by the Janizaries, after promises of safety sworn by Suleyman, whom men named the Generous.

While Ferdinand and the nobles and bishops squabbled at the Diet of Spires, the elements alone seemed to war for Christendom. Rain fell in torrents, and through the floods that changed plains and forest-bed to dank morasses, the Turks struggled grimly. They drowned in raging rivers, and lost great stores of ammunition, ordnance and supplies when boats capsized, bridges gave way, and wagons mired. But on they came, driven by the implacable will of Suleyman, and now in September, 1529, over the ruins of Hungary, the Turk swept on Europe, with the Akinji – the Sackmen – ravaging the land like the drift ahead of a storm.

This in part Gottfried learned from the fugitives as he pushed his weary stallion toward the city which was the only sanctuary for the panting thousands. Behind him the skies flamed red and the screams of butchered victims came dimly down the wind to his ears. Sometimes he could even make out the swarming black masses of wild horsemen. The wings of the vulture beat horrifically over that butchered land and the shadows of those great wings fell across all Europe. Again the destroyer was riding out of the blue mysterious East as his brothers had ridden before him – Attila – Subotai – Bayazid – Muhammad the Conqueror. But never before had such a storm risen against the West.

Before the waving vulture wings the road thronged with wailing fugitives; behind them it ran red and silent, strewn with mangled shapes that cried no more. The killers were not a half-hour behind him when Gottfried von Kalmbach rode his reeling stallion through the gates of Vienna. The people on the walls had heard the wailing for hours, rising awfully on the wind, and now afar they saw the sun flicker on the points of lances as the horsemen rode in amongst the masses of fugitives toiling down from the hills into the plain which girdles the city. They saw the play of naked steel like sickles among ripe grain.

Von Kalmbach found the city in turmoil, the people swirling and screaming about Count Nikolas Salm, the seventy-years-old warhorse who commanded Vienna, and his aides, Roggendrof, Count Nikolas Zrinyi and Paul Bakics. Salm was working with frantic haste, levelling houses near the walls and using their material to brace the ramparts, which were old and unstable, nowhere more than six feet thick, and in many places crumbling and falling down. The outer palisade was so frail it bore the name of Stadtzaun – city hedge.

But under the lashing energy of Count Salm, a new wall twenty feet high was thrown up from the Stuben to the Karnthner Gate. Ditches interior to the old moat were dug, and ramparts erected from the drawbridge to the Salz Gate. Roofs were stripped of shingles, to lessen the chances of fire, and paving was ripped up to soften the impact of cannon-balls.

The suburbs had been deserted, and now they were fired lest they give shelter to the besiegers. In the process, which was carried out in the very teeth of the oncoming Sackmen, conflagrations broke out in the city and added to the delirium. It was all hell and bedlam turned loose, and in the midst of it, five thousand wretched noncombatants, old men and women, and children, were ruthlessly driven from the gates to shift for themselves, and their screams, as the Akinjis swooped down, maddened the people within the walls. These hellions were arriving by thousands, topping the sky-lines, and sweeping down on the city in irregular squadrons, like vultures gathering about a dying camel. Within an hour after the first swarm

had appeared, not one Christian remained alive outside the gates, except those bound by long ropes to the saddle-peaks of their captors and forced to run at full speed or be dragged to death. The wild riders swirled about the walls, yelling and loosing their shafts. Men on the towers recognized the dread Mikhal Oglu by the wings on his cuirass, and noted that he rode from one heap of dead to another, avidly scanning each corpse in turn, pausing to glare questioningly at the battlements.

Meanwhile, from the west, a band of German and Spanish troops cut their way through a cordon of Sackmen and marched into the streets to the accompaniment of frenzied cheers, Philip the Palgrave at their head.

Gottfried von Kalmbach leaned on his sword and watched them pass in their gleaming breastplates and plumed crested helmets, with long matchlocks on their shoulders and two-handed swords strapped to their steel-clad backs. He was a curious contrast in his rusty chain-mail, old-fashioned harness picked up here and there and slovenly pieced together – he seemed like a figure out of the past, rusty and tarnished, watching a newer, brighter generation go by. Yet Philip saluted him, with a glance of recognition, as the shining column swung past.

Von Kalmbach started toward the walls, where the gunners were firing frugally at the Akinji, who showed some disposition to climb upon the bastions on lariats thrown from their saddles. But on the way he heard that Salm was impressing nobles and soldiers in the task of digging moats and rearing new earthworks, and in great haste he took refuge in a tavern, where he bullied the host, a knock-kneed and apprehensive Wallachian, into giving him credit, and rapidly drank himself into a state where no one would have considered asking him to do work of any kind.

Shots, shouts and screams reached his ears, but he paid scant heed. He knew that the Akinji would strike and pass on, to ravage the country beyond. He learned from the tavern talk that Salm had 20,000 pikemen, 2,000 horsemen and 1,000 volunteer citizens to

oppose Suleyman's hordes, together with seventy guns – cannons, demi-cannons and culverins. The news of the Turks' numbers numbed all hearts with dread – all but von Kalmbach's. He was a fatalist in his way. But he discovered a conscience in ale, and was presently brooding over the people the miserable Viennese had driven forth to perish. The more he drank the more melancholy he became, and maudlin tears dripped from the drooping ends of his mustaches.

At last he rose unsteadily and took up his great sword, muzzily intent on challenging Count Salm to a duel because of the matter. He bellowed down the timid importunities of the Wallachian and weaved out on the street. To his groggy sight the towers and spires cavorted crazily; people jostled him, knocking him aside as they ran about aimlessly. Philip the Palgrave strode by clanking in his armor, the keen dark faces of his Spaniards contrasting with the square, florid countenances of the Lanzknechts.

"Shame upon you, von Kalmbach!" said Philip sternly. "The Turk is upon us, and you keep your snout shoved in an ale-pot!"

"Whose snout is in what ale-pot?" demanded Gottfried, weaving in an erratic half-circle as he fumbled at his sword. "Devil bite you, Philip, I'll rap your pate for that –"

The Palgrave was already out of sight, and eventually Gottfried found himself on the Karnthner Tower, only vaguely aware of how he had got there. But what he saw sobered him suddenly. The Turk was indeed upon Vienna. The plain was covered with his tents, thirty thousand, some said, and swore that from the lofty spire of Saint Stephen's cathedral a man could not see their limits. Four hundred of his boats lay on the Danube, and Gottfried heard men cursing the Austrian fleet which lay helpless far upstream, because its sailors, long unpaid, refused to man the ships. He also heard that Salm had made no reply at all to Suleyman's demand to surrender.

Now, partly as a gesture, partly to awe the Caphar dogs, the Grand Turk's array was moving in orderly procession before the ancient walls before settling down to the business of the siege. The sight was enough to awe the stoutest. The low-swinging sun struck fire from polished helmet, jeweled saber-hilt and lance-point. It was

as if a river of shining steel flowed leisurely and terribly past the walls of Vienna.

The Akinji, who ordinarily formed the vanguard of the host, had swept on, but in their place rode the Tatars of Crimea, crouching on their high-peaked, short-stirruped saddles, their gnome-like heads guarded by iron helmets, their stocky bodies with bronze breastplates and lacquered leather. Behind them came the Azabs, the irregular infantry, Kurds and Arabs for the most part, a wild, motley horde. Then their brothers, the Delis, the Madcaps, wild men on tough ponies fantastically adorned with fur and feathers. The riders wore caps and mantles of leopard skin; their unshorn hair hung in tangled strands about their high shoulders, and over their matted beards their eyes glared the madness of fanaticism and bhang.

After them came the real body of the army. First the beys and emirs with their retainers – horsemen and footmen from the feudal fiefs of Asia Minor. Then the Spahis, the heavy cavalry, on splendid steeds. And last of all the real strength of the Turkish empire – the most terrible military organization in the world – the Janizaries. On the walls men spat in black fury, recognizing kindred blood. For the Janizaries were not Turks. With a few exceptions, where Turkish parents had smuggled their offspring into the ranks to save them from the grinding life of a peasant, they were sons of Christians – Greeks, Serbs, Hungarians – stolen in infancy and raised in the ranks of Islam, knowing but one master – the Sultan; but one occupation – slaughter.

Their beardless features contrasted with those of their Oriental masters. Many had blue eyes and yellow mustaches. But all their faces were stamped with the wolfish ferocity to which they had been reared. Under their dark blue cloaks glinted fine mail, and many wore steel skull-caps under their curious, high-peaked hats, from which depended a white sleeve-like piece of cloth, and through which was thrust a copper spoon. Long bird-of-paradise plumes likewise adorned these strange head-pieces.

Besides simitars, pistols and daggers, each Janizary bore a matchlock, and their officers carried pots of coals for the lighting of

the matches. Up and down the ranks scurried the dervishes, clad only in kalpaks of camel-hair and green aprons fringed with ebony beads, exhorting the Faithful. Military bands, the invention of the Turk, marched with the columns, cymbals clashing, lutes twanging. Over the flowing sea the banners tossed and swayed – the crimson flag of the Spahis, the white banner of the Janizaries with its two-edged sword worked in gold, and the horse-tail standards of the rulers – seven tails for the Sultan, six for the Grand Vizier, three for the Agha of the Janizaries. So Suleyman paraded his power before despairing Caphar eyes.

But von Kalmbach's gaze was centered on the groups that labored to set up the ordnance of the Sultan. And he shook his head in bewilderment.

"Demi-culverins, sakers, and falconets!" he grunted. "Where the devil's all the heavy artillery Suleyman's so proud of?"

"At the bottom of the Danube!" A Hungarian pikeman grinned fiercely and spat as he answered. "Wulf Hagen sank that part of the Soldan's flotilla. The rest of his cannon and cannon royal, they say, were mired because of the rains."

A slow grin bristled Gottfried's mustache. "What was Suleyman's word to Salm?"

"That he'd eat breakfast in Vienna day after tomorrow – the 29th." Gottfried shook his head ponderously.

IV

The siege commenced, with the roaring of cannons, the whistling of arrows, and the blasting crash of matchlocks. The Janizaries took possession of the ruined suburbs, where fragments of walls gave them shelter. Under a screen of irregulars and a volley of arrow-fire, they advanced methodically just after dawn.

On a gun-turret on the threatened wall, leaning on his great sword and meditatively twisting his mustache, Gottfried von Kalmbach watched a Transylvanian gunner being carried off the wall, his brains oozing from a hole in his head; a Turkish matchlock had spoken too near the walls. The field-pieces of the Sultan were

barking like deep-toned dogs, knocking chips off the battlements. The Janizaries were advancing, kneeling, firing, reloading as they came on. Bullets glanced from the crenelles and whined off venomously into space. One flattened against Gottfried's hauberk, bringing an outraged grunt from him. Turning toward the abandoned gun, he saw a colorful, incongruous figure bending over the massive breech.

It was a woman, dressed as von Kalmbach had not seen even the dandies of France dressed. She was tall, splendidly shaped, but lithe. From under a steel cap escaped rebellious tresses that rippled red gold in the sun over her compact shoulders. High boots of Cordovan leather came to her mid-thighs, which were cased in baggy breeches. She wore a shirt of fine Turkish mesh-mail tucked into her breeches. Her supple waist was confined by a flowing sash of green silk, into which were thrust a brace of pistols and a dagger, and from which depended a long Hungarian saber. Over all was carelessly thrown a scarlet cloak.

This surprizing figure was bending over the cannon, sighting it in a manner betokening more than a passing familiarity, at a group of Turks who were wheeling a carriage-gun just within range.

"Eh, Red Sonya!" shouted a man-at-arms, waving his pike. "Give 'em hell, my lass."

"Trust me, dog-brother," she retorted as she applied the glowing match to the vent. "But I wish my mark was Roxelana's –"

A terrific detonation drowned her words and a swirl of smoke blinded every one on the turret, as the terrific recoil of the overcharged cannon knocked the firer flat on her back. She sprang up like a spring rebounding and rushed to the embrasure, peering eagerly through the smoke, which clearing, showed the ruin of the gun crew. The huge ball, bigger than a man's head, had smashed full into the group clustered about the saker, and now they lay on the torn ground, their skulls blasted by the impact, or their bodies mangled by the flying iron splinters from their shattered gun. A cheer went up from the towers, and the woman called Red Sonya yelled with a sincere joy and did the steps of a Cossack dance.

Gottfried approached, eying in open admiration the splendid swell of her bosom beneath the pliant mail, the curves of her ample hips and rounded limbs. She stood as a man might stand, booted legs braced wide apart, thumbs hooked into her girdle, but she was all woman. She was laughing as she faced him, and he noted with fascination the dancing sparkling lights and changing colors of her eyes. She raked back her rebellious locks with a powder-stained hand and he wondered at the clear pinky whiteness of her firm flesh where it was unstained.

"Why did you wish for the Sultana Roxelana for a target, my girl?" he asked.

"Because she's my sister, the slut!" answered Sonya. At that instant a great cry thundered over the walls and the girl started like a wild thing, ripping out her blade in a long flash of silver in the sun. "That bellow!" she cried. "The Janizaries –"

Gottfried was already on his way to the embrasures. He too had heard before the terrible soul-shaking shout of the charging Janizaries. Suleyman meant to waste no time on the city that barred him from helpless Europe. He meant to crush its frail walls in one storm. The bashi-bazouki, the irregulars, died like flies to screen the main advance, and over heaps of their dead, the Janizaries thundered against Vienna. In the teeth of cannonade and musket volley they surged on, crossing the moats on scaling-ladders laid across, bridge-like. Whole ranks went down as the Austrian guns roared, but now the attackers were under the walls and the cumbrous balls whirred over their heads, to work havoc in the rear ranks.

The Spanish matchlock men, firing almost straight down, took ghastly toll, but now the ladders gripped the walls, and the chanting madmen surged upward. Arrows whistled, striking down the defenders. Behind them the Turkish field-pieces boomed, careless of injury to friend as well as foe. Gottfried, standing at an embrasure, was overthrown by a sudden terrific impact. A ball had smashed the merlon, braining half a dozen defenders.

Gottfried rose, half stunned, out of the debris of masonry and huddled corpses. He looked down into an uprushing waste of snarling, impassioned faces, where eyes glared like mad dogs' and blades glittered like sunbeams on water. Bracing his feet wide, he heaved up his great sword and lashed down. His jaw jutted out, his mustache bristled. The five-foot blade caved in steel caps and skulls, lashing through uplifted bucklers and iron shoulder-pieces. Men fell from the ladders, their nerveless fingers slipping from the bloody rungs.

But they swarmed through the breach on either side of him. A terrible cry announced that the Turks had a foothold on the wall. But no man dared leave his post to go to the threatened point. To the dazed defenders it seemed that Vienna was ringed by a glittering, tossing sea that roared higher and higher about the doomed walls.

Stepping back to avoid being hemmed in, Gottfried grunted and lashed right and left. His eyes were no longer cloudy; they blazed like blue bale-fire. Three Janizaries were down at his feet; his broadsword clanged in a forest of slashing simitars. A blade splintered on his basinet, filling his eyes with fire-shot blackness. Staggering, he struck back and felt his great blade crunch home. Blood jetted over his hands and he tore his sword clear. Then with a yell and a rush someone was at his side and he heard the quick splintering of mail beneath the madly flailing strokes of a saber that flashed like silver lightning before his clearing sight.

It was Red Sonya who had come to his aid, and her onslaught was no less terrible than that of a she-panther. Her strokes followed each other too quickly for the eye to follow; her blade was a blur of white fire, and men went down like ripe grain before the reaper. With a deep roar Gottfried strode to her side, bloody and terrible, swinging his great blade. Forced irresistibly back, the Moslems wavered on the edge of the wall, then leaped for the ladders or fell screaming through empty space.

Oaths flowed in a steady stream from Sonya's red lips and she laughed wildly as her saber sang home and blood spurted along the edge. The last Turk on the battlement screamed and parried wildly as she pressed him; then dropping his simitar, his clutching hands closed desperately on her dripping blade. With a groan he swayed on the edge, blood gushing from his horribly cut fingers.

"Hell to you, dog-soul!" she laughed. "The devil can stir your broth for you!"

With a twist and a wrench she tore away her saber, severing the wretch's fingers; with a moaning cry he pitched backward and fell headlong.

On all sides the Janizaries were falling back. The field-pieces, halted while the fighting went on upon the walls, were booming again, and the Spaniards, kneeling at the embrasures, were returning the fire with their long matchlocks.

Gottfried approached Red Sonya, who was cleansing her blade, swearing softly.

“By God, my girl,” said he, extending a huge hand, “had you not come to my aid, I think I’d have supped in hell this night. I thank –”

“Thank the devil!” retorted Sonya rudely, slapping his hand aside. “The Turks were on the wall. Don’t think I risked my hide to save yours, dog-brother!”

And with a scornful flirt of her wide coattails, she swaggered off down the battlements, giving back promptly and profanely the rude sallies of the soldiers. Gottfried scowled after her, and a Lanzknecht slapped him jovially on the shoulder.

“Eh, she’s a devil, that one! She drinks the strongest head under the table and outswears a Spaniard. She’s no man’s light o’ love. Cut – slash – death to you, dog-soul! There’s her way.”

“Who is she, in the devil’s name?” growled von Kalmbach.

“Red Sonya from Rogatino – that’s all we know. Marches and fights like a man – God knows why. Swears she’s sister to Roxelana, the Soldan’s favorite. If the Tatars who grabbed Roxelana that night had got Sonya, by Saint Piotr! Suleyman would have had a handful! Let her alone, sir brother; she’s a wildcat. Come and have a tankard of ale.”

The Janizaries, summoned before the Grand Vizier to explain why the attack failed after the wall had been scaled at one place, swore they had been confronted by a devil in the form of a red-headed woman, aided by a giant in rusty mail. Ibrahim discounted the woman, but the description of the man woke a half-forgotten memory in his mind. After dismissing the soldiers, he summoned the Tatar, Yaruk Khan, and dispatched him up-country to demand of Mikhal Oglu why he had not sent a certain head to the royal tent.

V

Suleyman did not eat his breakfast in Vienna on the morning of the 29th. He stood on the height of Semmering, before his rich pavilion with its gold-knobbed pinnacles and its guard of five hundred Solaks, and watched his light batteries pecking away vainly at the frail walls; he saw his irregulars wasting their lives like water, striving to fill the fosse, and he saw his sappers burrowing like

moles, driving mines and counter-mines nearer and nearer the bastions.

Within the city there was little ease. Night and day the walls were manned. In their cellars the Viennese watched the faint vibrations of peas on drumheads that betrayed the sounds of digging in the earth that told of Turkish mines burrowing under the walls. They sank their counter-mines accordingly, and men fought no less fiercely under the earth than above.

Vienna was the one Christian island in a sea of infidels. Night by night men watched the horizons burning where the Akinji yet scoured the agonized land. Occasionally word came from the outer world – slaves escaping from the camp and slipping into the city. Always their news was fresh horror. In Upper Austria less than a third of the inhabitants were left alive; Mikhal Oglu was outdoing himself. And the people said that it was evident the vulture-winged one was looking for one in particular. His slayers brought men's heads and heaped them high before him; he avidly searched among the grisly relics, then, apparently in fiendish disappointment, drove his devils to new atrocities.

These tales, instead of paralyzing the Austrians with dread, fired them with the mad fury of desperation. Mines exploded, breaches were made and the Turks swarmed in, but always the desperate Christians were there before them, and in the choking, blind, wild-beast madness of hand-to-hand fighting they paid in part the red debt they owed.

September dwindled into October; the leaves turned brown and yellow on Wiener Wald, and the winds blew cold. The watchers shivered at night on the walls that whitened to the bite of the frost; but still the tents ringed the city; and still Suleyman sat in his magnificent pavilion and glared at the frail barrier that barred his imperial path. None but Ibrahim dared speak to him; his mood was black as the cold nights that crept down from the northern hills. The wind that moaned outside his tent seemed a dirge for his ambitions of conquest.

Ibrahim watched him narrowly, and after a vain onset that lasted from dawn till midday, he called off the Janizaries and bade them retire into the ruined suburbs and rest. And he sent a bowman to shoot a very certain shaft into a very certain part of the city, where certain persons were waiting for just such an event.

No more attacks were made that day. The field-pieces, which had been pounding at the Karnthner Gate for days, were shifted northward, to hammer at the Burg. As an assault on that part of the wall seemed imminent, the bulk of the soldiery was shifted there. But the onslaught did not come, though the batteries kept up a steady fire, hour after hour. Whatever the reason, the soldiers gave thanks for the respite; they were dizzy with fatigue, mad with raw wounds and lack of sleep.

That night the great square, the Am-Hof market, seethed with soldiers, while civilians looked on enviously. A great store of wine had been discovered hidden in the cellars of a rich Jewish merchant, who hoped to reap triple profit when all other liquor in the city was gone. In spite of their officers, the half-crazed men rolled the great hogsheads into the square and broached them. Salm gave up the attempt to control them. Better drunkenness, growled the old warhorse, than for the men to fall in their tracks from exhaustion. He paid the Jew from his own purse. In relays the soldiers came from the walls and drank deep.

In the glare of cressets and torches, to the accompaniment of drunken shouts and songs, to which the occasional rumble of a cannon played a sinister undertone, von Kalmbach dipped his basinet into a barrel and brought it out brimful and dripping. Sinking his mustache into the liquid, he paused as his clouded eyes, over the rim of the steel cap, rested on a strutting figure on the other side of the hogshead. Resentment touched his expression. Red Sonya had already visited more than one barrel. Her burganet was thrust sidewise on her rebellious locks, her swagger was wilder, her eyes more mocking.

“Ha!” she cried scornfully. “It’s the Turk-killer, with his nose deep in the keg, as usual! Devil bite all topers!”

She consistently thrust a jeweled goblet into the crimson flood and emptied it at a gulp. Gottfried stiffened resentfully. He had had a tilt with Sonya already, and he still smarted.

"Why should I even look at you, in your ragged harness and empty purse," she had mocked, "when even Paul Bakics is mad for me? Go along, guzzler, beer-keg!"

"Be damned to you," he had retorted. "You needn't be so high, just because your sister is the Soldan's mistress –"

At that she had flown into an awful passion, and they had parted with mutual curses. Now, from the devil in her eyes, he saw that she intended making things further uncomfortable for him.

"Hussy!" he growled. "I'll drown you in this hogshead."

"Nay, you'll drown yourself first, boar-pig!" she shouted amid a roar of rough laughter. "A pity you aren't as valiant against the Turks as you are against the wine-butts!"

"Dogs bite you, slut!" he roared. "How can I break their heads when they stand off and pound us with cannon balls? Shall I throw my dagger at them from the wall?"

"There are thousands just outside," she retorted in the madness induced by drink and her own wild nature, "if any had the guts to go to them."

"By God!" the maddened giant dragged out his great sword. "No baggage can call me coward, sot or not! I'll go out upon them, if never a man follow me!"

Bedlam followed his bellow; the drunken temper of the crowd was fit for such madness. The nearly empty hogsheads were deserted as men tipsily drew sword and reeled toward the outer gates. Wulf Hagen fought his way into the storm, buffeting men right and left, shouting fiercely, "Wait, you drunken fools! Don't surge out in this shape! Wait –" They brushed him aside, sweeping on in a blind senseless torrent.

Dawn was just beginning to tip the eastern hills. Somewhere in the strangely silent Turkish camp a drum began to throb. Turkish sentries stared wildly and loosed their matchlocks in the air to warn

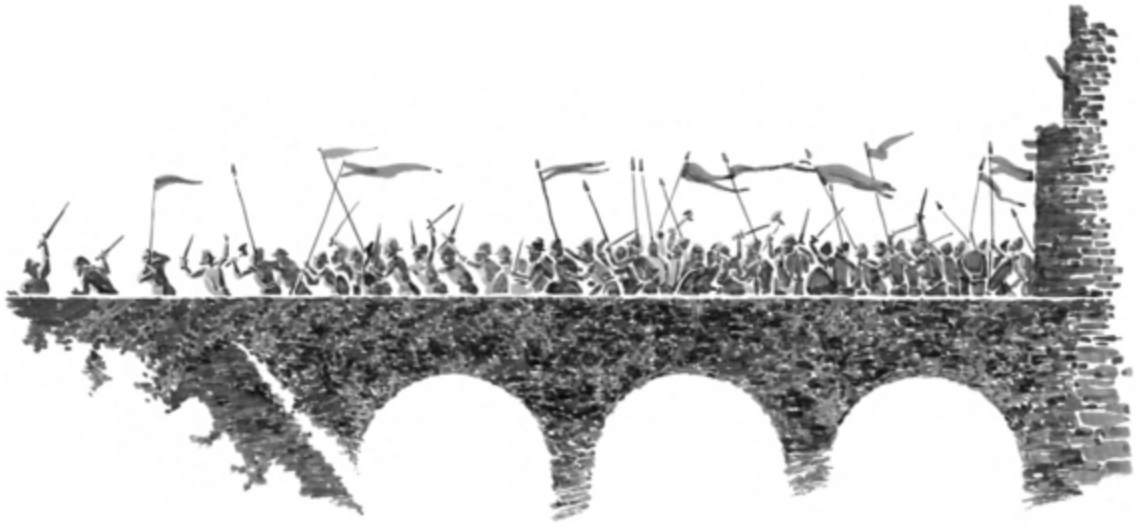
the camp, appalled at the sight of the Christian horde pouring over the narrow drawbridge, eight thousand strong, brandishing swords and ale tankards. As they foamed over the moat a terrific explosion rent the din, and a portion of the wall near the Karnthner Gate seemed to detach itself and rise into the air. A great shout rose from the Turkish camp, but the attackers did not pause.

They rushed headlong into the suburbs, and there they saw the Janizaries, not rousing from slumber, but fully clad and armed, being hurriedly drawn up in charging lines. Without pausing, they burst headlong into the half-formed ranks. Far outnumbered, their drunken fury and velocity was yet irresistible. Before the madly thrashing axes and lashing broadswords, the Janizaries reeled back dazed and disordered. The suburbs became a shambles where battling men, slashing and hewing at one another, stumbled on mangled bodies and severed limbs. Suleyman and Ibrahim, on the height of Semmering, saw the invincible Janizaries in full retreat, streaming out toward the hills.

In the city the rest of the defenders were working madly to repair the great breach the mysterious explosion had torn in the wall. Salm gave thanks for that drunken sortie. But for it, the Janizaries would have been pouring through the breach before the dust settled.

All was confusion in the Turkish camp. Suleyman ran to his horse and took charge in person, shouting at the Spahis. They formed ranks and swung down the slopes in orderly squadrons. The Christian warriors, still following their fleeing enemies, suddenly awakened to their danger. Before them the Janizaries were still falling back, but on either flank the horsemen of Asia were galloping to cut them off. Fear replaced drunken recklessness. They began to fall back, and the retreat quickly became a rout. Screaming in blind panic they threw away their weapons and fled for the drawbridge. The Turks rode them down to the water's edge, and tried to follow them across the bridge, into the gates which were opened for them. And there at the bridge Wulf Hagen and his retainers met the pursuers and held them hard. The flood of the fugitives flowed past

him to safety; on him the Turkish tide broke like a red wave. He loomed, a steel-clad giant, in a waste of spears.



Gottfried von Kalmbach did not voluntarily quit the field, but the rush of his companions swept him along the tide of flight, blaspheming bitterly. Presently he lost his footing and his panic-stricken comrades stampeded across his prostrate frame. When the frantic heels ceased to drum on his mail, he raised his head and saw that he was near the fosse, and naught but Turks about him. Rising, he ran lumberingly toward the moat, into which he plunged unexpectedly, looking back over his shoulder at a pursuing Moslem.

He came up floundering and spluttering, and made for the opposite bank, splashing water like a buffalo. The blood-mad Muhammadan was close behind him – an Algerian corsair, as much at home in water as out. The stubborn German would not drop his great sword, and burdened by his mail, just managed to reach the other bank, where he clung, utterly exhausted and unable to lift a hand in defense as the Algerian swirled in, dagger gleaming above his naked shoulder. Then some one swore heartily on the bank hard by. A slim hand thrust a long pistol into the Algerian's face; he screamed as it exploded, making a ghastly ruin of his head. Another slim, strong hand gripped the sinking German by the scruff of his mail.

“Grab the bank, fool!” gritted a voice, indicative of great effort. “I can’t heave you up alone; you must weigh a ton. Pull, dolt, pull!”

Blowing, gasping and floundering, Gottfried half clambered, was half lifted, out of the moat. He showed some disposition to lie on his belly and retch, what of the dirty water he had swallowed, but his rescuer urged him to his feet.

“The Turks are crossing the bridge and the lads are closing the gates against them – haste, before we’re cut off.”

Inside the gate Gottfried stared about, as if waking from a dream.

“Where’s Wulf Hagen? I saw him holding the bridge.”

“Lying dead among twenty dead Turks,” answered Red Sonya.

Gottfried sat down on a piece of fallen wall, and because he was shaken and exhausted, and still mazed with drink and blood-lust, he sank his face in his huge hands and wept. Sonya kicked him disgustedly.

“Name o’ Satan, man, don’t sit and blubber like a spanked schoolgirl. You drunkards had to play the fool, but that can’t be mended. Come – let’s go to the Walloon’s tavern and drink ale.”

“Why did you pull me out of the moat?” he asked.

“Because a great oaf like you never can help himself. I see you need a wise person like me to keep life in that hulking frame.”

“But I thought you despised me!”

“Well, a woman can change her mind, can’t she?” she snapped.

Along the walls the pikemen were repelling the frothing Moslems, thrusting them off the partly repaired breach. In the royal pavilion Ibrahim was explaining to his master that the devil had undoubtedly inspired that drunken sortie just at the right moment to spoil the Grand Vizier’s carefully laid plans. Suleyman, wild with fury, spoke shortly to his friend for the first time.

“Nay, thou hast failed. Have done with thine intrigues. Where craft has failed, sheer force shall prevail. Send a rider for the Akinji; they are needed here to replace the fallen. Bid the hosts to the attack again.”

VI

The preceding onslaughts were naught to the storm that now burst on Vienna's reeling walls. Night and day the cannons flashed and thundered. Bombs burst on roofs and in the streets. When men died on the walls there was none to take their places. Fear of famine stalked the streets and the darker fear of treachery ran black-mantled through the alleys. Investigation showed that the blast that had rent the Karnthner wall had not been fired from without. In a mine tunnelled from an unsuspected cellar inside the city, a heavy charge of powder had been exploded beneath the wall. One or two men, working secretly, might have done it. It was now apparent that the bombardment of the Burg had been merely a gesture to draw attention away from the Karnthner wall, to give the traitors an opportunity to work undiscovered.

Count Salm and his aides did the work of giants. The aged commander, fired with superhuman energy, trod the walls, braced the faltering, aided the wounded, fought in the breaches side by side with the common soldiers, while death dealt his blows unsparingly.

But if death supped within the walls, he feasted full without. Suleyman drove his men as relentlessly as if he were their worst foe. Plague stalked among them, and the ravaged countryside yielded no food. The cold winds howled down from the Carpathians and the warriors shivered in their light Oriental garb. In the frosty nights the hands of the sentries froze to their matchlocks. The ground grew hard as flint and the sappers toiled feebly with blunted tools. Rain fell, mingled with sleet, extinguishing matches, wetting powder, turning the plain outside the city to a muddy wallow, where rotting corpses sickened the living.

Suleyman shuddered as with an ague, as he looked out over the camp. He saw his warriors, worn and haggard, toiling in the muddy plain like ghosts under the gloomy leaden skies. The stench of his slaughtered thousands was in his nostrils. In that instant it seemed to the Sultan that he looked on a gray plain of the dead, where corpses dragged their lifeless bodies to an outworn task, animated only by the ruthless will of their master. For an instant the Tatar in his veins rose above the Turk and he shook with fear. Then his lean

jaws set. The walls of Vienna staggered drunkenly, patched and repaired in a score of places. How could they stand?

“Sound for the onslaught. Thirty thousand aspers to the first man on the walls!”

The Grand Vizier spread his hands helplessly. “The spirit is gone out of the warriors. They can not endure the miseries of this icy land.”

“Drive them to the walls with whips,” answered Suleyman, grimly. “This is the gate to Frankistan. It is through it we must ride the road to empire.”

Drums thundered through the camp. The weary defenders of Christendom rose up and gripped their weapons, electrified by the instinctive knowledge that the death-grip had come.

In the teeth of roaring matchlocks and swinging broadswords, the officers of the Sultan drove the Moslem hosts. Whips cracked and men cried out blasphemously up and down the lines. Maddened, they hurled themselves at the reeling walls, riddled with great breaches, yet still barriers behind which desperate men could crouch. Charge after charge rolled on over the choked fosse, broke on the staggering walls, and rolled back, leaving its wash of dead. Night fell unheeded, and through the darkness, lighted by blaze of cannon and flare of torches, the battle raged. Driven by Suleyman’s terrible will, the attackers fought throughout the night, heedless of all Moslem tradition.

Dawn rose as on Armageddon. Before the walls of Vienna lay a vast carpet of steel-clad dead. Their plumes waved in the wind. And across the corpses staggered the hollow-eyed attackers to grapple with the dazed defenders.

The steel tides rolled and broke, and rolled on again, till the very gods must have stood aghast at the giant capacity of men for suffering and enduring. It was the Armageddon of races – Asia against Europe. About the walls raved a sea of Eastern faces – Turks, Tatars, Kurds, Arabs, Algerians, snarling, screaming, dying before the roaring matchlocks of the Spaniards, the thrust of Austrian pikes, the strokes of the German Lanzknechts, who swung their two-handed swords like reapers mowing ripe grain. Those within the

walls were no more heroic than those without, stumbling among fields of their own dead.

To Gottfried von Kalmbach, life had faded to a single meaning – the swinging of his great sword. In the wide breach by the Karnthner Tower he fought until time lost all meaning. For long ages maddened faces rose snarling before him, the faces of devils, and simitars flashed before his eyes everlastingly. He did not feel his wounds, nor the drain of weariness. Gasping in the choking dust, blind with sweat and blood, he dealt death like a harvest, dimly aware that at his side a slim, pantherish figure swayed and smote – at first with laughter, curses and snatches of song, later in grim silence.

His identity as an individual was lost in that cataclysm of swords. He hardly knew it when Count Salm was death-stricken at his side by a bursting bomb. He was not aware when night crept over the hills, nor did he realize at last that the tide was slackening and ebbing. He was only dimly aware that Nikolas Zrinyi tore him away from the corpse-choked breach, saying, “God’s name, man, go and sleep. We’ve beaten them off – for the time being, at least.”

He found himself in a narrow, winding street, all dark and forsaken. He had no idea of how he had got there, but seemed vaguely to remember a hand on his elbow, tugging, guiding. The weight of his mail pulled at his sagging shoulders. He could not tell if the sound he heard were the cannon fitfully roaring, or a throbbing in his own head. It seemed there was some one he should look for – some one who meant a great deal to him. But all was vague. Somewhere, sometime, it seemed long, long ago, a sword-stroke had cleft his basinet. When he tried to think he seemed to feel again the impact of that terrible blow, and his brain swam. He tore off the dented head-piece and cast it into the street.

Again the hand was tugging at his arm. A voice urged, “Wine, my lord – drink!”

Dimly he saw a lean, black-mailed figure extending a tankard. With a gasp he caught at it and thrust his muzzle into the stinging liquor, gulping like a man dying of thirst. Then something burst in his brain. The night filled with a million flashing sparks, as if a

powder magazine had exploded in his head. After that, darkness and oblivion.

He came slowly to himself, aware of a raging thirst, an aching head, and an intense weariness that seemed to paralyze his limbs. He was bound hand and foot, and gagged. Twisting his head, he saw that he was in a small bare dusty room, from which a winding stone stair led up. He deduced that he was in the lower part of the tower.

Over a guttering candle on a crude table stooped two men. They were both lean and hook-nosed, clad in plain black garments – Asiatics, past doubt. Gottfried listened to their low-toned conversation. He had picked up many languages in his wanderings. He recognized them – Tshoruk and his son Rhupen, Armenian merchants. He remembered that he had seen Tshoruk often in the last week or so, ever since the domed helmets of the Akinji had appeared in Suleyman's camp. Evidently the merchant had been shadowing him, for some reason. Tshoruk was reading what he had written on a bit of parchment.

"My lord, though I blew up the Karnthner wall in vain, yet I have news to make my lord's heart glad. My son and I have taken the German, von Kalmbach. As he left the wall, dazed with fighting, we followed, guiding him subtly to the ruined tower whereof you know, and giving him drugged wine, bound him fast. Let my lord send the emir Mikhal Oglu to the wall by the tower, and we will give him into thy hands. We will bind him on the old mangonel and cast him over the wall like a tree trunk."

The Armenian took up an arrow and began to bind the parchment about the shaft with light silver wire.

"Take this to the roof, and shoot it toward the mantlet, as usual," he began, when Rhupen exclaimed, "Hark!" and both froze, their eyes glittering like those of trapped vermin – fearful yet vindictive.

Gottfried gnawed at the gag; it slipped. Outside he heard a familiar voice. "Gottfried! Where the devil are you?"

His breath burst from him in a stentorian roar. "Hey, Sonya! Name of the devil! Be careful, girl –"

Tshoruk snarled like a wolf and struck him savagely on the head with a simitar hilt. Almost instantly, it seemed, the door crashed inward. As in a dream Gottfried saw Red Sonya framed in the doorway, pistol in hand. Her face was drawn and haggard; her eyes burned like coals. Her basinet was gone, and her scarlet cloak. Her mail was hacked and red-clotted, her boots slashed, her silken breeches splashed and spotted with blood.

With a croaking cry Tshoruk ran at her, simitar lifted. Before he could strike, she crashed down the barrel of the empty pistol on his head, felling him like an ox. From the other side Rhupen slashed at her with a curved Turkish dagger. Dropping the pistol, she closed with the young Oriental. Moving like some one in a dream, she bore him irresistibly backward, one hand gripping his wrist, the other his throat. Throttling him slowly, she inexorably crashed his head again and again against the stones of the wall, until his eyes rolled up and set. Then she threw him from her like a sack of loose salt.

"God!" she muttered thickly, reeling an instant in the center of the room, her hands to her head. Then she went to the captive and sinking stiffly to her knees, cut his bonds with fumbling strokes that sliced his flesh as well as the cords.

"How did you find me?" he asked stupidly, clambering stiffly up.

She reeled to the table and sank down in a chair. A flagon of wine stood at her elbow and she seized it avidly and drank. Then she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and surveyed him wearily but with renewed life.

"I saw you leave the wall and followed. I was so drunk from the fighting I scarce knew what I did. I saw those dogs take your arm and lead you into the alleys, and then I lost sight of you. But I found your burganet lying outside in the street, and began shouting for you. What the hell's the meaning of this?"

She picked up the arrow, and blinked at the parchment fastened to it. Evidently she could read the Turkish characters, but she scanned it half a dozen times before the meaning became apparent to her exhaustion-numbed brain. Then her eyes flickered dangerously to the men on the floor. Tshoruk sat up, dazedly feeling the gash in his scalp; Rhupen lay retching and gurgling on the floor.

“Tie them up, brother,” she ordered, and Gottfried obeyed. The victims eyed the woman much more apprehensively than him.

“This missive is addressed to Ibrahim, the Wezir,” she said abruptly. “Why does he want Gottfried’ s head?”

“Because of a wound he gave the Sultan at Mohacz,” muttered Tshoruk uneasily.

“And you, you lower-than-a-dog,” she smiled mirthlessly, “you fired the mine by the Karnthner! You and your spawn are the traitors among us.” She drew and primed a pistol. “When Zrinyi learns of you,” she said, “your end will be neither quick nor sweet. But first, you old swine, I’m going to give myself the pleasure of blowing out your cub’s brains before your eyes –”

The older Armenian gave a choking cry. “God of my fathers, have mercy! Kill me – torture me – but spare my son!”

At that instant a new sound split the unnatural quiet – a great peal of bells shattered the air.

“What’s this?” roared Gottfried, groping wildly at his empty scabbard.

“The bells of Saint Stephen!” cried Sonya. “They peal for victory!”

She sprang for the sagging stair and he followed her up the perilous way. They came out on a sagging shattered roof, on a firmer part of which stood an ancient stone-casting machine, relic of an earlier age, and evidently recently repaired. The tower overlooked an angle of the wall, at which there were no watchers. A section of the ancient glacis, and a ditch interior to the main moat, coupled with a steep natural pitch of the earth beyond, made the point practically invulnerable. The spies had been able to exchange messages here with little fear of discovery, and it was easy to guess the method used. Down the slope, just within long arrow-shot, stood up a huge mantlet of bullhide stretched on a wooden frame, as if abandoned there by chance. Gottfried knew that message-laden arrows were loosed from the tower roof into this mantlet. But just then he gave little thought to that. His attention was riveted on the Turkish camp. There a leaping glare paled the spreading dawn; above the mad

clangor of the bells rose the crackle of flames, mingled with awful screams.

"The Janizaries are burning their prisoners," said Red Sonya.

"Judgment Day in the morning," muttered Gottfried, awed at the sight that met his eyes.

From their eyrie the companions could see almost all of the plain. Under a cold gray leaden sky, tinged a somber crimson with dawn, it lay strewn with Turkish corpses as far as the sight would carry. And the hosts of the living were melting away. From Semmering the great pavilion had vanished. The other tents were now coming down fast. Already the head of the long column was out of sight, moving into the hills through the cold dawn. Snow began falling in light swift flakes.

The Janizaries were glutting their mad disappointment on their helpless captives, hurling men, women and children living into the flames they had kindled under the somber eyes of their master, the monarch men called the Magnificent, the Merciful. All the time the bells of Vienna clanged and thundered as if their bronze throats would burst.

"They shot their bolt last night," said Red Sonya. "I saw their officers lashing them, and heard them cry out in fear beneath our swords. Flesh and blood could stand no more. Look!" She clutched her companion's arm. "The Akinji will form the rear-guard."

Even at that distance they made out a pair of vulture wings moving among the dark masses; the sullen light glimmered on a jeweled helmet. Sonya's powder-stained hands clenched so that the pink, broken nails bit into the white palms, and she spat out a Cossack curse that burned like vitriol.

"There he goes, the bastard, that made Austria a desert! How easily the souls of the butchered folk ride on his cursed winged shoulders! Anyway, old warhorse, he didn't get your head."

"While he lives it'll ride loose on my shoulders," rumbled the giant.

Red Sonya's keen eyes narrowed suddenly. Seizing Gottfried's arm, she hurried downstairs. They did not see Nikolas Zrinyi and

Paul Bakics ride out of the gates with their tattered retainers, risking their lives in sorties to rescue prisoners. Steel clashed along the line of march, and the Akinji retreated slowly, fighting a good rear-guard action, balking the headlong courage of the attackers by their very numbers. Safe in the depths of his horsemen, Mikhal Oglu grinned sardonically. But Suleyman, riding in the main column, did not grin. His face was like a death-mask.

Back in the ruined tower, Red Sonya propped one booted foot on a chair, and cupping her chin in her hand, stared into the fear-dulled eyes of Tshoruk.

"What will you give for your life?"

The Armenian made no reply.

"What will you give for the life of your whelp?"

The Armenian started as if stung. "Spare my son, princess," he groaned. "Anything – I will pay – I will do anything."

She threw a shapely booted leg across the chair and sat down. "I want you to bear a message to a man."

"What man?"

"Mikhal Oglu."

He shuddered and moistened his lips with his tongue. "Instruct me; I obey," he whispered.

"Good. We'll free you and give you a horse. Your son shall remain here as hostage. If you fail us, I'll give the cub to the Viennese to play with –" Again the old Armenian shuddered.

"But if you play squarely, we'll let you both go free, and my pal and I will forget about this treachery. I want you to ride after Mikhal Oglu and tell him –"

Through the slush and driving snow, the Turkish column plodded slowly. Horses bent their heads to the blast; up and down the straggling lines camels groaned and complained, and oxen bellowed pitifully. Men stumbled through the mud, leaning beneath the weight of their arms and equipment. Night was falling, but no command had been given to halt. All day the retreating host had

been harried by the daring Austrian cuirassiers who darted down upon them like wasps, tearing captives from their very hands.

Grimly rode Suleyman among his Solaks. He wished to put as much distance as possible between himself and the scene of his first defeat, where the rotting bodies of thirty thousand Muhammadans reminded him of his crushed ambitions. Lord of western Asia he was; master of Europe he could never be. Those despised walls had saved the Western world from Moslem dominion, and Suleyman knew it. The rolling thunder of the Ottoman power re-echoed around the world, paling the glories of Persia and Mogul India. But in the West the yellow-haired Aryan barbarian stood unshaken. It was not written that the Turk should rule beyond the Danube.

Suleyman had seen this written in blood and fire, as he stood on Semmering and saw his warriors fall back from the ramparts, despite the flailing lashes of their officers. It had been to save his authority that he gave the order to break camp – it burned his tongue like gall, but already his soldiers were burning their tents and preparing to desert him. Now in darkly brooding silence he rode, not even speaking to Ibrahim.

In his own way Mikhal Oglu shared their savage despondency. It was with a ferocious reluctance that he turned his back on the land he had ruined, as a half-glutted panther might be driven from its prey. He recalled with satisfaction the blackened, corpse-littered wastes – the screams of tortured men – the cries of girls writhing in his iron arms; recalled with much the same sensations the death-shrieks of those same girls in the blood-fouled hands of his killers.

But he was stung with the disappointment of a task undone – for which the Grand Vizier had lashed him with stinging word. He was out of favor with Ibrahim. For a lesser man that might have meant a bowstring. For him it meant that he would have to perform some prodigious feat to reinstate himself. In this mood he was dangerous and reckless as a wounded panther.

Snow fell heavily, adding to the miseries of the retreat. Wounded men fell in the mire and lay still, covered by a growing white mantle. Mikhal Oglu rode among his rearmost ranks, straining his eyes into the darkness. No foe had been sighted for hours. The victorious Austrians had ridden back to their city.

The columns were moving slowly through a ruined village, whose charred beams and crumbling fire-seared walls stood blackly in the falling snow. Word came back down the lines that the Sultan would pass on through and camp in a valley which lay a few miles beyond.

The quick drum of hoofs back along the way they had come caused the Akinji to grip their lances and glare slit-eyed into the flickering darkness. They heard but a single horse, and a voice calling the name of Mikhal Oglu. With a word the chief stayed a dozen lifted bows, and shouted in return. A tall, gray stallion loomed out of the flying snow, a black-mantled figure crouched grotesquely atop of it.

“Tshoruk! You Armenian dog! What in the name of Allah –”

The Armenian rode close to Mikhal Oglu and whispered urgently in his ear. The cold bit through the thickest garments. The Akinji noted that Tshoruk was trembling violently. His teeth chattered and

he stammered in his speech. But the Turk's eyes blazed at the import of his message.

"Dog, do you lie?"

"May I rot in hell if I lie!" A strong shudder shook Tshoruk and he drew his kaftan close about him. "He fell from his horse, riding with the cuirassiers to attack the rear-guard, and lies with a broken leg in a deserted peasant's hut some three miles back – alone except for his mistress Red Sonya, and three or four Lanzknechts, who are drunk on wine they found in the deserted camp."

Mikhal Oglu wheeled his horse with sudden intent.

"Twenty men to me!" he barked. "The rest ride on with the main column. I go after a head worth its weight in gold. I'll overtake you before you go into camp."

Othman caught his jeweled rein. "Are you mad, to ride back now? The whole country will be on our heels –"

He reeled in his saddle as Mikhal Oglu slashed him across the mouth with his riding-whip. The chief wheeled away, followed by the men he had designated. Like ghosts they vanished into the spectral darkness.

Othman sat his horse uncertainly, looking after them. The snow shafted down, the wind sobbed drearily among the bare branches. There was no sound except the receding noises of the trudging column. Presently these ceased. Then Othman started. Back along the way they had come, he heard a distant reverberation, a roar as of forty or fifty matchlocks speaking together. In the utter silence which followed, panic came upon Othman and his warriors. Whirling away they fled through the ruined village after the retreating horde.

VII

None noticed when night fell on Constantinople, for the splendor of Suleyman made night no less glorious than day. Through gardens that were riots of blossoms and perfume, cressets twinkled like myriad fireflies. Fireworks turned the city into a realm of shimmering magic, above which the minarets of five hundred

mosques rose like towers of fire in an ocean of golden foam. Tribesmen on Asian hills gaped and marvelled at the blaze that pulsed and glowed afar, paling the very stars. The streets of Stamboul were thronged with crowds in the attire of holiday and rejoicing. The million lights shone on jeweled turban and striped khalat – on dark eyes sparkling over filmy veils – on shining palanquins borne on the shoulders of huge ebony-skinned slaves.

All that splendor centered in the Hippodrome, where in lavish pageants the horsemen of Turkistan and Tatary competed in breath-taking races with the riders of Egypt and Arabia, where warriors in glittering mail spilled one another's blood on the sands, where swordsmen were matched against wild beasts, and lions were pitted against tigers of Bengal and boars from northern forests. One might have deemed the imperial pageantry of Rome revived in Eastern garb.

On a golden throne, set upon lapis lazuli pillars, Suleyman reclined, gazing on the splendors, as purple-togaed Caesars had gazed before him. About him bowed his viziers and officers, and the ambassadors from foreign courts – Venice, Persia, India, the khanates of Tatary. They came – including the Venetians – to congratulate him on his victory over the Austrians. For this grand fête was in celebration of that victory, as set forth in a manifesto under the Sultan's hand, which stated, in part, that the Austrians having made submission and sued for pardon on their knees, and the German realms being so distant from the Ottoman empire, "the Faithful would not trouble to clean out the fortress (Vienna), or purify, improve, and put it in repair." Therefore the Sultan had accepted the submission of the contemptible Germans, and left them in possession of their paltry "fortress"!

Suleyman was blinding the eyes of the world with the blaze of his wealth and glory, and striving to make himself believe that he had actually accomplished all he had intended. He had not been beaten on the field of open battle; he had set his puppet on the Hungarian throne; he had devastated Austria; the markets of Stamboul and Asia were full of Christian slaves. With this knowledge he soothed his vanity, ignoring the fact that thirty thousand of his subjects rotted

before Vienna, and that his dreams of European conquest had been shattered.

Behind the throne shone the spoils of war – silken and velvet pavilions, wrested from the Persians, the Arabs, the Egyptian memluks; costly tapestries, heavy with gold embroidery. At his feet were heaped the gifts and tributes of subject and allied princes. There were vests of Venetian velvet, golden goblets crusted with jewels from the courts of the Grand Moghul, ermine-lined kaftans from Erzeroum, carven jade from Cathay, silver Persian helmets with horse-hair plumes, turban-cloths, cunningly sewn with gems, from Egypt, curved Damascus blades of watered steel, matchlocks from Kabul worked richly in chased silver, breastplates and shields of Indian steel, rare furs from Mongolia. The throne was flanked on either hand by a long rank of youthful slaves, made fast by golden collars to a single, long silver chain. One file was composed of young Greek and Hungarian boys, the other of girls; all clad only in plumed head-pieces and jeweled ornaments intended to emphasize their nudity.

Eunuchs in flowing robes, their rotund bellies banded by cloth-of-gold sashes, knelt and offered the royal guests sherbets in gemmed goblets, cooled with snow from the mountains of Asia Minor. The torches danced and flickered to the roars of the multitudes. Around the courses swept the horses, foam flying from their bits; wooden castles reeled and went up in flames as the Janizaries clashed in mock warfare. Officers passed among the shouting people, tossing showers of copper and silver coins amongst them. None hungered or thirsted in Stamboul that night except the miserable Caphar captives. The minds of the foreign envoys were numbed by the bursting sea of splendor, the thunder of imperial magnificence. About the vast arena stalked trained elephants, almost covered with housings of gold-worked leather, and from the jeweled towers on their backs, fanfares of trumpets vied with the roar of the throngs and the bellowing of lions. The tiers of the Hippodrome were a sea of faces, all turning toward the jeweled figure on the shining throne, while thousands of tongues wildly thundered his acclaim.

As he impressed the Venetian envoys, Suleyman knew he impressed the world. In the blaze of his magnificence, men would forget that a handful of desperate Caphars behind rotting walls had closed his road to empire. Suleyman accepted a goblet of the forbidden wine, and spoke aside to the Grand Vizier, who stepped forth and lifted his arms.

"Oh, guests of my master, the Padishah forgets not the humblest in the hour of rejoicing. To the officers who led his hosts against the infidels, he has made rare gifts. Now he gives two hundred and forty thousand ducats to be distributed among the common soldiers, and likewise to each Janizary he gives a thousand aspers."

In the midst of the roar that went up, a eunuch knelt before the Grand Vizier, holding up a large round package, carefully bound and sealed. A folded piece of parchment, held shut by a red seal, accompanied it. The attention of the Sultan was attracted.

"Oh, friend, what has thou there?"

Ibrahim salaamed. "The rider of the Adrianople post delivered it, oh Lion of Islam. Apparently it is a gift of some sort from the Austrian dogs. Infidel riders, I understand, gave it into the hands of the border guard, with instructions to send it straightway to Stamboul."

"Open it," directed Suleyman, his interest roused. The eunuch salaamed to the floor, then began breaking the seals of the package. A scholarly slave opened the accompanying note and read the contents, written in a bold yet feminine hand:

To the Soldan Suleyman and his Wezir Ibrahim and to the hussy Roxelana we who sign our names below send a gift in token of our immeasurable fondness and kind affection.

Sonya of Rogatino, and Gottfried von Kalmbach

Suleyman, who had started up at the name of his favorite, his features suddenly darkening with wrath, gave a choking cry, which was echoed by Ibrahim. The eunuch had torn the seals of the bale, disclosing what lay within. A pungent scent of herbs and preservative spices filled the air, and the object, slipping from the

horrified eunuch's hands, tumbled among the heaps of presents at Suleyman's feet, offering a ghastly contrast to the gems, gold and velvet bales. The Sultan stared down at it and in that instant his shimmering pretense of triumph slipped from him; his glory turned to tinsel and dust. Ibrahim tore at his beard with a gurgling, strangling sound, purple with rage.

At the Sultan' s feet, the features frozen in a death-mask of horror, lay the severed head of Mikhal Oglu, Vulture of the Grand Turk.

OceanofPDF.com

Echoes from an Anvil

I leave to paltry poets
The tabor and the lute;
I sing in drums and tom-toms
The black abysmal brute –
My voice is of the people,
That giant wild and mute.

(With blood of all the ages
His broken nails are black,
The whole world weights and burdens
His hairy bestial back;
He shambles down forever
A blind and tangled track.)

I bring no polished diamonds,
No gems from London town;
No cultured whim or fancy
My rugged verses crown;
You find here naught but power
That breaks a city down.

I spill no words of beauty,
Coins from a silver purse,
My hands are built of iron,
And iron is in my verse.
I bring no love but fury,
No blessing but a curse.

My low pitched brow is slanting,
My eyes are burning red,
With fierce black primal visions
That thunder in my head;
Behind my heart the rivers
And all the jungles spread.

I slaved in star-girt Babel

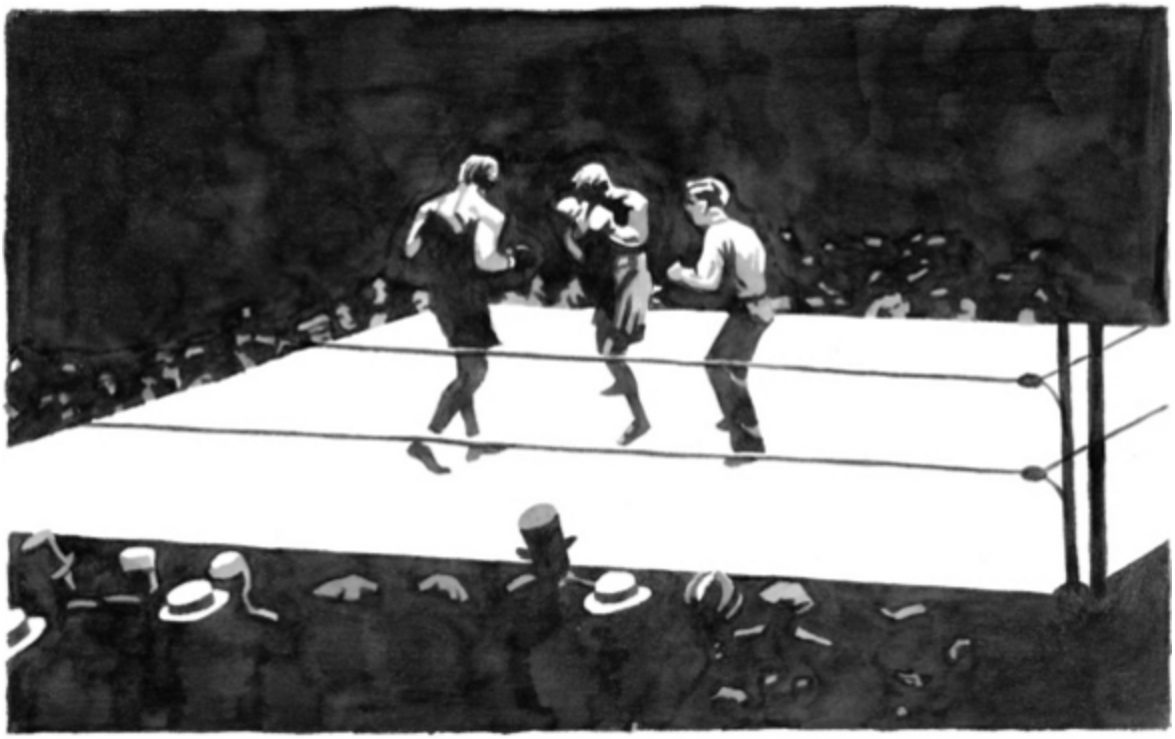
And labored at the wall;
I watched the birth of pavements
Beneath my slugging maul –
And in a frenzied dawning
I saw her towers fall.

I toiled in Tuscan vineyards,
I broke the beaten loam,
I strained against the mallet
That drove the chisel home;
I sweated in the galleys
That broke the road to Rome.

Oh, Khan and king and pharaoh!
In cold and drouth and heat
I bled to build your glory,
An ant beneath your feet –
But always rose a morning
When blood ran in the street.

The world upon my shoulders
Knee deep in muck and silt,
My hand beneath my tatters
Still grips the hidden hilt –
Who fed the ancient rivers
With blood rebellions spilt?

OceanofPDF.com



The Bull Dog Breed

"And so," concluded the Old Man, "this big bully ducked the seltzer bottle and the next thing I knowed I knowed nothin'. I come to with the general idee that the *Sea-Girl* was sinkin' with all hands and I was drownin' – but it was only some chump pourin' water all over me to bring me to. Oh, yeah, the big French cluck I had the row with was nobody much, I learned – just only merely nobody but Tiger Valois, the heavyweight champion of the French navy –"

Me and the crew winked at each other. Until the captain decided to unburden to Penrhyn, the first mate, in our hearing, we'd wondered about the black eye he'd sported following his night ashore in Manila. He'd been in an unusual bad temper ever since, which means he'd been acting like a sore-tailed hyena. The Old Man was a Welshman, and he hated a Frenchman like he hated a snake. He now turned on me.

"If you was any part of a man, you big mick ham," he said bitterly, "you wouldn't stand around and let a blankety-blank French so-on and so-forth lay out your captain. Oh, yeah, I know you wasn't there, then, but if you'll fight him –"

"Aragh!" I said with sarcasm, "leavin' out the fact that I'd stand a great chance of gettin' matched with Valois – why not pick me somethin' easy, like Dempsey? Do you realize you're askin' me, a ordinary ham-an'-egger, to climb the original and only Tiger Valois that's whipped everything in European and the Asian waters and looks like a sure bet for the world's title?"

"Gerahh!" snarled the Old Man. "Me that's boasted in every port of the Seven Seas that I shipped the toughest crew since the days of Harry Morgan –" He turned his back in disgust and immediately fell over my white bulldog, Mike, who was taking a snooze by the hatch. The Old Man give a howl as he come up and booted the innocent pup most severe. Mike instantly attached hisself to the Old Man's leg, from which I at last succeeded in prying him with a loss of some meat and the pants leg.

The captain danced hither and yon about the deck on one foot while he expressed his feelings at some length and the crew stopped

work to listen and admire.

"And get me right, Steve Costigan," he wound up, "the *Sea-Girl* is too small for me and that double-dash dog. He goes ashore at the next port. Do you hear me?"

"Then I go ashore with him," I answered with dignity. "It was not Mike what caused you to get a black eye, and if you had not been so taken up in abusin' me you would not have fell over him.

"Mike is a Dublin gentleman, and no Welsh water rat can boot him and get away with it. If you want to banish your best A.B. mariner, it's up to you. Till we make port you keep your boots off of Mike, or I will personally kick you loose from your spine. If that's mutiny, make the most of it – and, Mister First Mate, I see you easin' toward that belayin' pin on the rail, and I call to your mind what I done to the last man that hit me with a belayin' pin."

There was a coolness between me and the Old Man thereafter. The old nut was pretty rough and rugged, but good at heart, and likely he was ashamed of himself, but he was too stubborn to admit it, besides still being sore at me and Mike. Well, he paid me off without a word at Hong-Kong, and I went down the gangplank with Mike at my heels, feeling kind of queer and empty, though I wouldn't show it for nothing, and acted like I was glad to get off the old tub. But since I growed up, the *Sea-Girl's* been the only home I knowed, and though I've left her from time to time to prowl around loose or to make a fight tour, I've always come back to her.

Now I knowed I couldn't come back, and it hit me hard. The *Sea-Girl* is the only thing I'm champion of, and as I went ashore I heard the sound of Mushy Hansen and Bill O'Brien trying to decide which should succeed to my place of honor.

Well, maybe some will say I should of sent Mike ashore and stayed on, but to my mind, a man that won't stand by his dog is lower down than one which won't stand by his fellow man.

Some years ago I'd picked Mike up wandering around the wharfs of Dublin and fighting everything he met on four legs and not averse to tackling two-legged critters. I named him Mike after a brother of

mine, Iron Mike Costigan, rather well known in them higher fight circles where I've never gotten to.

Well, I wandered around the dives and presently fell in with Tom Roche, a lean, fighting engineer that I once knocked out in Liverpool. We meandered around, drinking here and there, though not very much, and presently found ourselves in a dump a little different from the general run. A French joint, kinda more highbrow, if you get me. A lot of swell-looking fellows was in there drinking, and the bartenders and waiters, all French, scowled at Mike, but said nothing. I was unburdening my woes to Tom, when I noticed a tall, elegant young man with a dress suit, cane and gloves stroll by our table. He seemed well known in the dump, because birds all around was jumping up from their tables and waving their glasses and yelling at him in French. He smiled back in a superior manner and flourished his cane in a way which irritated me. This galoot rubbed me the wrong way right from the start, see?

Well, Mike was snoozing close to my chair as usual, and, like any other fighter, Mike was never very particular where he chose to snooze. This big bimbo could have stepped over him or around him, but he stopped and prodded Mike with his cane. Mike opened one eye, looked up and lifted his lip in a polite manner, just like he was sayin': "We don't want no trouble; go 'long and leave me alone."

Then this French dipthong drawed back his patent leather shoe and kicked Mike hard in the ribs. I was out of my chair in a second, seeing red, but Mike was quicker. He shot up off the floor, not for the Frenchman's leg, but for his throat. But the Frenchman, quick as a flash, crashed his heavy cane down across Mike's head, and the bulldog hit the floor and laid still. The next minute the Frenchman hit the floor, and believe me he laid still! My right-hander to the jaw put him down, and the crack his head got against the corner of the bar kept him there.

I bent over Mike, but he was already coming around, in spite of the fact that a loaded cane had been broken over his head. It took a blow like that to put Mike out, even for a few seconds. The instant he got his bearings, his eyes went red and he started out to find what hit him and tear it up. I grabbed him, and for a minute it was

all I could do to hold him. Then the red faded out of his eyes and he wagged his stump of a tail and licked my nose. But I knowed the first good chance he had at the Frenchman he'd rip out his throat or die trying. The only way you can lick a bulldog is to kill him.

Being taken up with Mike I hadn't had much time to notice what was going on. But a gang of French sailors had tried to rush me and had stopped at the sight of a gun in Tom Roche's hand. A real fighting man was Tom, and a bad egg to fool with.

By this time the Frenchman had woke up; he was standing with a handkerchief at his mouth, which latter was trickling blood, and honest to Jupiter I never saw such a pair of eyes on a human! His face was dead white, and those black, burning eyes blazed out at me – say, fellows! – they carried more than hate and a desire to muss me up! They was mutilation and sudden death! Once I seen a famous duelist in Heidelberg who'd killed ten men in sword fights – he had just such eyes as this fellow.

A gang of Frenchies was around him all whooping and yelling and jabbering at once, and I couldn't understand a word none of them said. Now one come prancing up to Tom Roche and shook his fist in Tom's face and pointed at me and yelled, and pretty soon Tom turned around to me and said: "Steve, this yam is challengin' you to a duel – what about?"

I thought of the German duelist and said to myself: "I bet this bird was born with a fencin' sword in one hand and a duelin' pistol in the other." I opened my mouth to say "Nothin' doin' –" when Tom pipes: "You're the challenged party – the choice of weapons is up to you."

At that I hove a sigh of relief and a broad smile flitted across my homely but honest countenance. "Tell him I'll fight him," I said, "with five-ounce boxin' gloves."

Of course I figured this bird never saw a boxing glove. Now, maybe you think I was doing him dirty, pulling a fast one like that – but what about him? All I was figuring on was mussing him up a little, counting on him not knowing a left hook from a neutral corner – takin' a mean advantage, maybe, but he was counting on

killing me, and I'd never had a sword in my hand, and couldn't hit the side of a barn with a gun.

Well, Tom told them what I said and the cackling and gibbering bust out all over again, and to my astonishment I saw a cold, deadly smile waft itself across the sinister, handsome face of my tête-à-tête.

"They ask who you are," said Tom. "I told 'em Steve Costigan, of America. This bird says his name is Francois, which he opines is enough for you. He says that he'll fight you right away at the exclusive Napoleon Club, which it seems has a ring account of it occasionally sponsoring prize fights."

As we wended our way toward the aforesaid club, I thought deeply. It seemed very possible that this Francois, whoever he was, knew something of the manly art. Likely, I thought, a rich clubman who took up boxing for a hobby. Well, I reckoned he hadn't heard of me, because no amateur, however rich, would think he had a chance against Steve Costigan, known in all ports as the toughest sailor in the Asian waters – if I do say so myself – and champion of – what I mean – ex-champion of the *Sea-Girl*, the toughest of all the trading vessels.

A kind of pang went through me just then at the thought that my days with the old tub was ended, and I wondered what sort of a dub would take my place at mess and sleep in my bunk, and how the forecastle gang would haze him, and how all the crew would miss me – I wondered if Bill O'Brien had licked Mushy Hansen or if the Dane had won, and who called hisself champion of the craft now –

Well, I felt low in spirits, and Mike knowed it, because he snuggled up closer to me in the 'rickshaw that was carrying us to the Napoleon Club, and licked my hand. I pulled his ears and felt better. Anyway, Mike wouldn't never desert me.

Pretty ritzy affair this club. Footmen or butlers or something in uniform at the doors, and they didn't want to let Mike in. But they did – oh, yeah, they did.

In the dressing room they give me, which was the swellest of its sort I ever see, and looked more like a girl's boodwar than a

fighter's dressing room, I said to Tom: "This big ham must have lots of dough – notice what a hand they all give him? Reckon I'll get a square deal? Who's goin' to referee? If it's a Frenchman, how'm I gonna follow the count?"

"Well, gee whiz!" Tom said, "you ain't expectin' him to count over you, are you?"

"No," I said. "But I'd like to keep count of what he tolls off over the other fellow."

"Well," said Tom, helping me into the green trunks they'd give me, "don't worry none. I understand Francois can speak English, so I'll specify that the referee shall converse entirely in that language."

"Then why didn't this Francois ham talk English to me?" I wanted to know.

"He didn't talk to you in anything," Tom reminded me. "He's a swell and thinks you're beneath his notice – except only to knock your head off."

"H'mm," said I thoughtfully, gently touching the slight cut which Francois' cane had made on Mike's incredibly hard head. A slight red mist, I will admit, waved in front of my eyes.

When I climbed into the ring I noticed several things: mainly the room was small and elegantly furnished; second, there was only a small crowd there, mostly French, with a scattering of English and one Chink in English clothes. There was high hats, frock-tailed coats and gold-knobbed canes everywhere, and I noted with some surprise that they was also a sprinkling of French sailors.

I sat in my corner, and Mike took his stand just outside, like he always does when I fight, standing on his hind legs with his head and forepaws resting on the edge of the canvas, and looking under the ropes. On the street, if a man soaks me he's likely to have Mike at his throat, but the old dog knows how to act in the ring. He won't interfere, though sometimes when I'm on the canvas or bleeding bad his eyes get red and he rumbles away down deep in his throat.

Tom was massaging my muscles light-like and I was scratching Mike's ears when into the ring comes Francois the Mysterious. *Qui!*

Qui! I noted now how much of a man he was, and Tom whispers to me to pull in my chin a couple of feet and stop looking so goofy. When Francois threw off his silk embroidered bathrobe I saw I was in for a rough session, even if this bird was only an amateur. He was one of these fellows that look like a fighting man, even if they've never seen a glove before.

A good six one and a half he stood, or an inch and a half taller than me. A powerful neck sloped into broad, flexible shoulders, a limber steel body tapered to a girlishly slender waist. His legs was slim, strong and shapely, with narrow feet that looked speedy and sure; his arms was long, thick, but perfectly molded. Oh, I tell you, this Francois looked more like a champion than any man I'd seen since I saw Dempsey last.

And the face – his sleek black hair was combed straight back and lay smooth on his head, adding to his sinister good looks. From under narrow black brows them eyes burned at me, and now they wasn't a duelist's eyes – they was tiger eyes. And when he gripped the ropes and dipped a couple of times, flexing his muscles, them muscles rippled under his satiny skin most beautiful, and he looked just like a big cat sharpening his claws on a tree.

"Looks fast, Steve," Tom Roche said, looking serious. "May know somethin'; you better crowd him from the gong and keep rushin' –"

"How else did I ever fight?" I asked.

A sleek-looking Frenchman with a sheik mustache got in the ring and, waving his hands to the crowd, which was still jabbering for Francois, he bust into a gush of French.

"What's he mean?" I asked Tom, and Tom said, "Aw, he's just sayin' what everybody knows – that this ain't a regular prize fight, but an affair of honor between you and – uh – that Francois fellow there."

Tom called him and talked to him in French, and he turned around and called an Englishman out of the crowd. Tom asked me was it all right with me for the Englishman to referee, and I tells him yes, and they asked Francois and he nodded in a supercilious manner. So the referee asked me what I weighed and I told him, and

he hollered: “This bout is to be at catch weights, Marquis of Queensberry rules. Three-minute rounds, one minute rest; to a finish, if it takes all night. In this corner, Monsieur Francois, weight 205 pounds; in this corner, Steve Costigan of America, weight 190 pounds. Are you ready, gentlemen?”

’Stead of standing outside the ring, English style, the referee stayed in with us, American fashion. The gong sounded and I was out of my corner. All I seen was that cold, sneering, handsome face, and all I wanted to do was to spoil it. And I very nearly done it the first charge. I came in like a house afire and I walloped Francois with an overhand right hook to the chin – more by sheer luck than anything, and it landed high. But it shook him to his toes, and the sneering smile faded.

Too quick for the eye to follow, his straight left beat my left hook, and it packed the jarring kick that marks a puncher. The next minute, when I missed with both hands and got that left in my pan again, I knowed I was up against a master boxer, too.

I saw in a second I couldn’t match him for speed and skill. He was like a cat; each move he made was a blur of speed, and when he hit he hit quick and hard. He was a brainy fighter – he thought out each move while traveling at high speed, and he was never at a loss what to do next.

Well, my only chance was to keep on top of him, and I kept crowding him, hitting fast and heavy. He wouldn’t stand up to me, but back-pedaled all around the ring. Still, I got the idea that he wasn’t afraid of me, but was retreating with a purpose of his own. But I never stop to figure out why the other bird does something.

He kept reaching me with that straight left, until finally I dived under it and sank my right deep into his midriff. It shook him – it should of brought him down. But he clinched and tied me up so I couldn’t hit or do nothing. As the referee broke us Francois scraped his glove laces across my eyes. With an appropriate remark, I threw my right at his head with everything I had, but he drifted out of the

way, and I fell into the ropes from the force of my own swing. The crowd howled with laughter, and then the gong sounded.

"This baby's tough," said Tom, back in my corner, as he rubbed my belly muscles, "but keep crowdin' him, get inside that left, if you can. And watch the right."

I reached back to scratch Mike's nose and said, "You watch this round."

Well, I reckon it was worth watching. Francois changed his tactics, and as I come in he met me with a left to the nose that started the claret and filled my eyes full of water and stars. While I was thinking about that he opened a cut under my left eye with a venomous right-hander and then stuck the same hand into my midriff. I woke up and bent him double with a savage left hook to the liver, crashing him with an overhand right behind the ear before he could straighten. He shook his head, snarled a French cuss word and drifted back behind that straight left where I couldn't reach him.

I went into him like a whirlwind, lamming head on full into that left jab again and again, trying to get to him, but always my swings were short. Them jabs wasn't hurting me yet, because it takes a lot of them to weaken a man. But it was like running into a floating brick wall, if you get what I mean. Then he started crossing his right – and oh, baby, what a right he had! Blip! Blim! Blam!

His rally was so unexpected and he hit so quick that he took me clean off my guard and caught me wide open. That right was lightning! In a second I was groggy, and Francois beat me back across the ring with both hands going too fast for me to block more than about a fourth of the blows. He was wild for the kill now and hitting wide open.

Then the ropes was at my back and I caught a flashing glimpse of him, crouching like a big tiger in front of me, wide open and starting his right. In that flash of a second I shot my right from the hip, beat his punch and landed solid to the button. Francois went down like he'd been hit with a pile driver – the referee leaped forward – the gong sounded!

As I went to my corner the crowd was clean ory-eyed and not responsible; and I saw Francois stagger up, glassy-eyed, and walk to his stool with one arm thrown over the shoulder of his handler.

But he come out fresh as ever for the third round. He'd found out that I could hit as hard as he could and that I was dangerous when groggy, like most sluggers. He was wild with rage, his smile was gone, his face dead white again, his eyes was like black fires – but he was cautious. He side-stepped my rush, hooking me viciously on the ear as I shot past him, and ducking when I slewed around and hooked my right. He backed away, shooting that left to my face. It went that way the whole round; him keeping the right reserved and marking me up with left jabs while I worked for his body and usually missed or was blocked. Just before the gong he rallied, staggered me with a flashing right hook to the head and took a crushing left hook to the ribs in return.

———

The fourth round come and he was more aggressive. He began to trade punches with me again. He'd shoot a straight left to my face, then hook the same hand to my body. Or he'd feint the left for my face and drop it to my ribs. Them hooks to the body didn't hurt much, because I was hard as a rock there, but a continual rain of them wouldn't do me no good, and them jabs to the face was beginning to irritate me. I was already pretty well marked up.

He shot his blows so quick I usually couldn't block or duck, so every time he'd make a motion with the left I'd throw my right for his head haphazard. After rocking his head back several times this way he quit feinting so much and began to devote most of his time to body blows.

Now I found out this about him: he had more claws than sand, as the saying goes. I mean he had everything, including a lot of stuff I didn't, but he didn't like to take it. In a mix-up he always landed three blows to my one, and he hit about as hard as I did, but he was always the one to back away.

Well, come the seventh round. I'd taken plenty. My left eye was closing fast and I had a nasty gash over the other one. My ribs was beginning to feel the body punishment he was handing out when in close, and my right ear was rapidly assuming the shape of a cabbage. Outside of some ugly welts on his torso, my dancing partner had only one mark on him – the small cut on his chin where I'd landed with my bare fist earlier in the evening.

But I was not beginning to weaken for I'm used to punishment; in fact I eat it up, if I do say so. I crowded Francois into a corner before I let go. I wrapped my arms around my neck, worked in close and then unwound with a looping left to the head.

Francois countered with a sickening right under the heart and I was wild with another left. Francois stepped inside my right swing, dug his heel into my instep, gouged me in the eye with his thumb and, holding with his left, battered away at my ribs with his right. The referee showed no inclination to interfere with this pastime, so, with a hearty oath, I wrenched my right loose and nearly tore off Francois' head with a torrid uppercut.

His sneer changed to a snarl and he began pistoning me in the face again with his left. Maddened, I crashed into him headlong and smashed my right under his heart – I felt his ribs bend, he went white and sick and clinched before I could follow up my advantage. I felt the drag of his body as his knees buckled, but he held on while I raged and swore, the referee would not break us, and when I tore loose, my charming playmate was almost as good as ever.

He proved this by shooting a left to my sore eye, dropping the same hand to my aching ribs and bringing up a right to the jaw that stretched me flat on my back for the first time that night. Just like that! Biff – bim – bam! Like a cat hitting – and I was on the canvas.

Tom Roche yelled for me to take a count, but I never stay on the canvas longer than I have to. I bounced up at "Four!" my ears still ringing and a trifle dizzy, but otherwise O.K.

Francois thought otherwise, rushed rashly in and stopped a left hook which hung him gracefully over the ropes. The gong!

The beginning of the eighth I come at Francois like we'd just started, took his right between my eyes to hook my left to his body – he broke away, spearing me with his left – I followed swinging – missed a right – crack!

He musta let go his right with all he had for the first time that night, and he had a clear shot to my jaw. The next thing I knowed, I was writhing around on the canvas feeling like my jaw was tore clean off and the referee was saying: "–seven –"

Somehow I got to my knees. It looked like the referee was ten miles away in a mist, but in the mist I could see Francois' face, smiling again, and I reeled up at "nine" and went for that face. Crack! Crack! I don't know what punch put me down again but there I was. I beat the count by a hair's breadth and swayed forward, following my only instinct and that was to walk into him!

Francois might have finished me there, but he wasn't taking any chances for he knowed I was dangerous to the last drop. He speared me a couple of times with the left, and when he shot his right, I ducked it and took it high on my forehead and clinched, shaking my

head to clear it. The referee broke us away and Francois lashed into me, cautious but deadly, hammering me back across the ring with me crouching and covering up the best I could.

On the ropes I unwound with a venomous looping right, but he was watching for that and ducked and countered with a terrible left to my jaw, following it with a blasting right to the side of the head. Another left hook threw me back into the ropes and there I caught the top rope with both hands to keep from falling. I was swaying and ducking but his gloves were falling on my ears and temples with a steady thunder which was growing dimmer and dimmer – then the gong sounded.

I let go of the ropes to go to my corner and when I let go I pitched to my knees. Everything was a red mist and the crowd was yelling about a million miles away. I heard Francois' scornful laugh, then Tom Roche was dragging me to my corner.

"By golly," he said, working on my cut up eyes, "you're sure a glutton for punishment; Joe Grim had nothin' on you.

"But you better lemme throw in the towel, Steve. This Frenchman's goin' to kill you –"

"He'll have to, to beat me," I snarled. "I'll take it standin'."

"But, Steve," Tom protested, mopping blood and squeezing lemon juice into my mouth, "this Frenchman is –"

But I wasn't listening. Mike knowed I was getting the worst of it and he'd shoved his nose into my right glove, growling low down in his throat. And I was thinking about something.

One time I was laid up with a broken leg in a little fishing village away up on the Alaskan coast, and looking through a window, not able to help him, I saw Mike fight a big gray devil of a sled dog – more wolf than dog. A big gray killer. They looked funny together – Mike short and thick, bow-legged and squat, and the wolf dog tall and lean, rangy and cruel.

Well, while I lay there and raved and tried to get off my bunk with four men holding me down, that blasted wolf-dog cut poor old Mike to ribbons. He was like lightning – like Francois. He fought

with the slash and get away – like Francois. He was all steel and whale-bone – like Francois.

Poor old Mike had kept walking into him, plunging and missing as the wolf-dog leaped aside – and every time he leaped he slashed Mike with his long sharp teeth till Mike was bloody and looking terrible. How long they fought I don't know. But Mike never give up; he never whimpered; he never took a single back step; he kept walking in on the dog.

At last he landed – crashed through the wolf-dog's defense and clamped his jaws like a steel vise and tore out the wolf-dog's throat. Then Mike slumped down and they brought him into my bunk more dead than alive. But we fixed him up and finally he got well, though he'll carry the scars as long as he lives.

And I thought, as Tom Roche rubbed my belly and mopped the blood off my smashed face, and Mike rubbed his cold, wet nose in my glove, that me and Mike was both of the same breed, and the only fighting quality we had was a everlasting persistence. You got to kill a bulldog to lick him. Persistence! How'd I ever won a fight? How'd Mike ever won a fight? By walking in on our men and never giving up, no matter how bad we was hurt! Always outclassed in everything except guts and grip! Somehow the fool Irish tears burned my eyes and it wasn't the pain of the collodion Tom was rubbing into my cuts and it wasn't self-pity – it was – I don't know what it was! My grandfather used to say the Irish cried at Benburb when they were licking the socks off the English.

Then the gong sounded and I was out in the ring again playing the old bulldog game with Francois – walking into him and walking into him and taking everything he handed me without flinching.

I don't remember much about that round. Francois' left was a red-hot lance in my face and his right was a hammer that battered in my ribs and crashed against my dizzy head. Toward the last my legs felt dead and my arms were like lead. I don't know how many times I went down and got up and beat the count, but I remember once in a clinch, half-sobbing through my pulped lips: "You gotta kill me to

stop me, you big hash!" And I saw a strange haggard look flash into his eyes as we broke. I lashed out wild and by luck connected under his heart. Then the red fog stole back over everything and then I was back on my stool and Tom was holding me to keep me from falling off.

"What round's this comin' up?" I mumbled.

"The tenth," he said. "For th' luvva Pete, Steve, quit!"

I felt around blind for Mike and felt his cold nose on my wrist.

"Not while I can see, stand or feel," I said, deliriously. "It's bulldog and wolf – and Mike tore his throat out in the end – and I'll rip this wolf apart sooner or later."

Back in the center of the ring with my chest all crimson with my own blood, and Francois' gloves soggy and splashing blood and water at every blow, I suddenly realized that his punches were losing some of their kick. I'd been knocked down I don't know how many times, but I now knew he was hitting me his best and I still kept my feet. My legs wouldn't work right, but my shoulders were still strong. Francois played for my eyes and closed them both tight shut, but while he was doing it I landed three times under the heart, and each time he wilted a little.

"What round's comin' up?" I groped for Mike because I couldn't see.

"The eleventh – this is murder," said Tom. "I know you're one of these birds which fights twenty rounds after they've been knocked cold, but I want to tell you this Frenchman is –"

"Lance my eyelid with your pocket-knife," I broke in, for I had found Mike. "I gotta see."

Tom grumbled, but I felt a sharp pain and the pressure eased up in my right eye and I could see dim-like.

Then the gong sounded, but I couldn't get up; my legs was dead and stiff.

"Help me up, Tom Roche, you big bog-trotter," I snarled. "If you throw in that towel I'll brain you with the water bottle!"

With a shake of his head he helped me up and shoved me in the ring. I got my bearings and went forward with a funny, stiff, mechanical step, toward Francois – who got up slow, with a look on

his face like he'd rather be somewhere else. Well, he'd cut me to pieces, knocked me down time and again, and here I was coming back for more. The bulldog instinct is hard to fight – it ain't just exactly courage, and it ain't exactly blood lust – it's – well, it's the bulldog breed.

Now I was facing Francois and I noticed he had a black eye and a deep gash under his cheek bone, though I didn't remember putting them there. He also had welts a-plenty on his body. I'd been handing out punishment as well as taking it, I saw.

Now his eyes blazed with a desperate light and he rushed in, hitting as hard as ever for a few seconds. The blows rained so fast I couldn't think and yet I knowed I must be clean batty – punch drunk – because it seemed like I could hear familiar voices yelling my name – the voices of the crew of the *Sea-Girl*, who'd never yell for me again.

I was on the canvas and this time I felt that it was to stay; dim and far away I saw Francois and somehow I could tell his legs was trembling and he shaking like he had a chill. But I couldn't reach him now. I tried to get my legs under me, but they wouldn't work. I slumped back on the canvas, crying with rage and weakness.

Then through the noise I heard one deep, mellow sound like an old Irish bell, almost. Mike's bark! He wasn't a barking dog; only on special occasions did he give tongue. This time he only barked once. I looked at him and he seemed to be swimming in a fog. If a dog ever had his soul in his eyes, he had; plain as speech them eyes said: "Steve, old kid, get up and hit one more blow for the glory of the breed!"

I tell you, the average man has got to be fighting for somebody else besides hisself. It's fighting for a flag, a nation, a woman, a kid or a dog that makes a man win. And I got up – I dunno how! But the look in Mike's eyes dragged me off the canvas just as the referee opened his mouth to say "Ten!" But before he could say it –

In the midst I saw Francois' face, white and desperate. The pace had told. Them blows I'd landed from time to time under the heart

had sapped his strength – he'd punched hisself out on me – but more'n anything else, the knowledge that he was up against the old bulldog breed licked him.

I drove my right smash into his face and his head went back like it was on hinges and the blood spattered. He swung his right to my head and it was so weak I laughed, blowing out a haze of blood. I rammed my left to his ribs and as he bent forward I crashed my right to his jaw. He dropped, and crouching there on the canvas, half supporting himself on his hands, he was counted out. I reeled across the ring and collapsed with my arms around Mike, who was whining deep in his throat and trying to lick my face off.

The first thing I felt on coming to was a cold, wet nose burrowing into my right hand, which seemed numb. Then somebody grabbed that hand and nearly shook it off and I heard a voice say: "Hey, you old shellback, you want to break a unconscious man's arm?"

I knowed I was dreaming then, because it was Bill O'Brien's voice, who was bound to be miles away at sea by this time. Then Tom Roche said: "I think he's comin' to. Hey, Steve, can you open your eyes?"

I took my fingers and pried the swollen lids apart and the first thing I saw, or wanted to see, was Mike. His stump tail was going like anything and he opened his mouth and let his tongue loll out, grinning as natural as could be. I pulled his ears and looked around and there was Tom Roche – and Bill O'Brien and Mushy Hansen, Olaf Larsen, Penrhyn, the first mate, Red O'Donnell, the second – and the Old Man!

"Steve!" yelled this last, jumping up and down and shaking my hand like he wanted to take it off, "you're a wonder! A blightin' marvel!"

"Well," said I, dazed, "why all the love fest –"

"The fact is," bust in Bill O'Brien, "just as we're about to weigh anchor, up blows a lad with the news that you're fightin' in the Napoleon Club with –"

“–and as soon as I heard who you was fightin’ with I stopped everything and we all blowed down there,” said the Old Man. “But the fool kid Roche had sent for us loafed on the way –”

“–and we hadda lay some Frenchies before we could get in,” said Hansen.

“So we saw only the last three rounds,” continued the Old Man. “But, boy, they was worth the money – he had you outclassed every way except guts – you was licked to a frazzle, but he couldn’t make you realize it – and I laid a bet or two –”

And blow me, if the Old Man didn’t stuff a wad of bills in my sore hand.

“Halfa what I won,” he beamed. “And furthermore, the *Sea-Girl* ain’t sailin’ till you’re plumb able and fit.”

“But what about Mike?” My head was swimming by this time.

“A bloomin’ bow-legged angel,” said the Old Man, pinching Mike’s ear lovingly. “The both of you kin have my upper teeth! I owe you a lot, Steve. You’ve done a lot for me, but I never felt so in debt to you as I do now. When I see that big French ham, the one man in the world I would of give my right arm to see licked –”

“Hey!” I suddenly seen the light, and I went weak and limp. “You mean that was –”

“You whipped Tiger Valois, heavyweight champion of the French fleet, Steve,” said Tom. “You ought to have known how he wears dude clothes and struts amongst the swells when on shore leave. He wouldn’t tell you who he was for fear you wouldn’t fight him; and I was afraid I’d discourage you if I told you at first and later you wouldn’t give me a chance.”

“I might as well tell you,” I said to the Old Man, “that I didn’t know this bird was the fellow that beat you up in Manila. I fought him because he kicked Mike.”

“Blow the reason!” said the Old Man, raring back and beaming like a jubilant crocodile. “You licked him – that’s enough. Now we’ll have a bottle opened and drink to Yankee ships and Yankee sailors – especially Steve Costigan.”

“Before you do,” I said, “drink to the boy who stands for everything them aforesaid ships and sailors stands for – Mike of

Dublin, an honest gentleman and born mascot of all fightin’ men!”

OceanofPDF.com

Black Harps in the Hills

Let Saxons sing of Saxon kings,
Red faced swine with a greasy beard –
Through my songs the Gaelic broadsword sings,
The pibrock skirls and the sporran swings,
For mine is the blood of the Irish kings
That Saxon monarchs feared.

The heather bends to a marching tread,
The echoes shake to a marching tune –
For the Gael has supped on bitter bread,
And follows the ghosts of the mighty dead,
And the blue blades gleam and the pikes burn red
In the rising of the moon.

Norseman reaver or red haired Dane,
Norman baron or English lord –
Each of them reeled to a reddened rain,
Drunken with fury and blind with pain,
Till the black fire spilled from the Gaelic brain
And the steel from the broken sword.

But never the chiefs in death lay still,
Never the clans lay scattered and few –
But a new face rose and a new voice roared,
And a new hand gripped the broken sword,
And the fleeing clans were a charging horde,
And the old hate burned anew!

Brian Boruma, Shane O'Neill,
Art McMurrough and Edward Bruce,
Thomas Fitzgerald – ringing steel
Shakes the hills and the trumpets peal,
Skulls crunch under the iron heel!
Death is the only truce!

Clontarf, Benburb, and Yellow Ford –

The Gael with red Death rides alone!
Lamh derg abu! And the riders reel
To Hugh O'Donnell's girding steel
And the lances of Tyrone!

Edward Fitzgerald, Charles Parnell,
Robert Emmet – I smite the harp!
Wolfe Tone and Napper Tandy – hail!
The song that you sang shall never fail
While one brain burns with the fire of the Gael
And one last sword is sharp –

Lamh laidir abu! Lamh derg abu!
Munster and Ulster, north and south,
The old hate flickers and burns anew,
The heather shakes and the pikes gleam blue.
And the old clans charge as they charged with you
Into Death's red grinning mouth!

We have not won and we have not lost –
Fire in Kerry and Fermanagh –
We have broken the teeth in the Saxon's boast
Though our dead have littered each heath and coast,
And by God, we will raise another host!
Slainte – Erin go bragh.

OceanofPDF.com

The Man on the Ground

Cal Reynolds shifted his tobacco quid to the other side of his mouth as he squinted down the dull blue barrel of his Winchester. His jaws worked methodically, their movement ceasing as he found his bead. He froze into rigid immobility; then his finger hooked on the trigger. The crack of the shot sent the echoes rattling among the hills, and like a louder echo came an answering shot. Reynolds flinched down, flattening his rangy body against the earth, swearing softly. A gray flake jumped from one of the rocks near his head, the ricocheting bullet whining off into space. Reynolds involuntarily shivered. The sound was as deadly as the singing of an unseen rattler.

He raised himself gingerly high enough to peer out between the rocks in front of him. Separated from his refuge by a broad level grown with mesquite-grass and prickly-pear, rose a tangle of boulders similar to that behind which he crouched. From among these boulders floated a thin wisp of whitish smoke. Reynold's keen eyes, trained to sun-scorched distances, detected a small circle of dully gleaming blue steel among the rocks. That ring was the muzzle of a rifle, but Reynolds well knew who lay behind that muzzle.

The feud between Cal Reynolds and Esau Brill had been long, for a Texas feud. Up in the Kentucky mountains family wars may straggle on for generations, but the geographical conditions and human temperament of the Southwest were not conducive to long-drawn-out hostilities. There feuds were generally concluded with appalling suddenness and finality. The stage was a saloon, the streets of a little cow-town, or the open range. Sniping from the laurel was exchanged for the close-range thundering of six-shooters and sawed-off shotguns which decided matters quickly, one way or the other.

The case of Cal Reynolds and Esau Brill was somewhat out of the ordinary. In the first place, the feud concerned only themselves. Neither friends nor relatives were drawn into it. No one, including the participants, knew just how it started. Cal Reynolds merely knew that he had hated Esau Brill most of his life, and that Brill reciprocated. Once as youths they had clashed with the violence and

intensity of rival young catamounts. From that encounter Reynolds carried away a knife scar across the edge of his ribs, and Brill a permanently impaired eye. It had decided nothing. They had fought to a bloody gasping deadlock, and neither had felt any desire to "shake hands and make up." That is a hypocrisy developed in civilization, where men have no stomach for fighting to the death. After a man has felt his adversary's knife grate against his bones, his adversary's thumb gouging at his eyes, his adversary's boot-heels stamped into his mouth, he is scarcely inclined to forgive and forget, regardless of the original merits of the argument.

So Reynolds and Brill carried their mutual hatred into manhood, and as cowpunchers riding for rival ranches, it followed that they found opportunities to carry on their private war. Reynolds rustled cattle from Brill's boss, and Brill returned the compliment. Each raged at the other's tactics, and considered himself justified in eliminating his enemy in any way that he could. Brill caught Reynolds without his gun one night in a saloon at Cow Wells, and only an ignominious flight out the back way, with bullets barking at his heels, saved the Reynolds scalp.

Again Reynolds, lying in the chaparral, neatly knocked his enemy out of his saddle at five hundred yards with a .30-.30 slug, and, but for the inopportune appearance of a line-rider, the feud would have ended there, Reynolds deciding, in the face of this witness, to forego his original intention of leaving his covert and hammering out the wounded man's brains with his rifle butt.

Brill recovered from his wound, having the vitality of a longhorn bull, in common with all his sun-leathered iron-thewed breed, and as soon as he was on his feet, he came gunning for the man who had waylaid him.

Now after these onsets and skirmishes, the enemies faced each other at good rifle range, among the lonely hills where interruption was unlikely.

For more than an hour they had lain among the rocks, shooting at each hint of movement. Neither had scored a hit, though the .30-.30's whistled perilously close.

In each of Reynold's temples a tiny pulse hammered maddeningly. The sun beat down on him and his shirt was soaked with sweat. Gnats swarmed about his head, getting into his eyes, and he cursed venomously. His wet hair was plastered to his scalp; his eyes burned with the glare of the sun, and the rifle barrel was hot to his calloused hand. His right leg was growing numb and he shifted it cautiously, cursing at the jingle of the spur, though he knew Brill could not hear. All this discomfort added fuel to the fire of his wrath. Without process of conscious reasoning, he attributed all his suffering to his enemy. The sun beat dazingly on his sombrero, and his thoughts were slightly addled. It was hotter than the hearthstone of hell among those bare rocks. His dry tongue caressed his baked lips.

Through the muddle of his brain burned his hatred of Esau Brill. It had become more than an emotion: it was an obsession, a monstrous incubus. When he flinched from the whip-crack of Brill's rifle, it was not from fear of death, but because the thought of dying at the hands of his foe was an intolerable horror that made his brain rock with red frenzy. He would have thrown his life away recklessly, if by so doing he could have sent Brill into eternity just three seconds ahead of himself.

He did not analyze these feelings. Men who live by their hands have little time for self-analysis. He was no more aware of the quality of his hate for Esau Brill than he was consciously aware of his hands and feet. It was part of him, and more than part: it enveloped him, engulfed him; his mind and body were no more than its material manifestations. He was the hate; it was the whole soul and spirit of him. Unhampered by the stagnant and enervating shackles of sophistication and intellectuality, his instincts rose sheer from the naked primitive. And from them crystallized an almost tangible abstraction – a hate too strong for even death to destroy; a hate powerful enough to embody itself in itself, without the aid or the necessity of material substance.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour neither rifle had spoken. Instinct with death as rattlesnakes coiled among the rocks soaking up poison from the sun's rays, the feudists lay each waiting his chance, playing

the game of endurance until the taut nerves of one or the other should snap.

It was Esau Brill who broke. Not that his collapse took the form of any wild madness or nervous explosion. The wary instincts of the wild were too strong in him for that. But suddenly, with a screamed curse, he hitched up on his elbow and fired blindly at the tangle of stones which concealed his enemy. Only the upper part of his arm and the corner of his blue-shirted shoulder were for an instant visible. That was enough. In that flash-second Cal Reynolds jerked the trigger, and a frightful yell told him his bullet had found its mark. And at the animal pain in that yell, reason and life-long instincts were swept away by an insane flood of terrible joy. He did not whoop exultantly and spring to his feet; but his teeth bared in a wolfish grin and he involuntarily raised his head. Waking instinct jerked him down again. It was chance that undid him. Even as he ducked back, Brill's answering shot cracked.

Cal Reynolds did not hear it, because, simultaneously with the sound, something exploded in his skull, plunging him into utter blackness, shot briefly with red sparks.

The blackness was only momentary. Cal Reynolds glared wildly around, realizing with a frenzied shock that he was lying in the open. The impact of the shot had sent him rolling from among the rocks, and in that quick instant he realized that it had not been a direct hit. Chance had sent the bullet glancing from a stone, apparently to flick his scalp in passing. That was not so important. What was important was that he was lying out in full view, where Esau Brill could fill him full of lead. A wild glance showed his rifle lying close by. It had fallen across a stone and lay with the stock against the ground, the barrel slanting upward. Another glance showed his enemy standing upright among the stones that had concealed him.

In that one glance Cal Reynolds took in the details of the tall, rangy figure: the stained trousers sagging with the weight of the holstered six-shooter, the legs tucked into the worn leather boots; the streak of crimson on the shoulder of the blue shirt, which was plastered to the wearer's body with sweat; the tousled black hair,

from which perspiration was pouring down the unshaven face. He caught the glint of yellow tobacco-stained teeth shining in a savage grin. Smoke still drifted from the rifle in Brill's hands.

These familiar and hated details stood out in startling clarity during the fleeting instant while Reynolds struggled madly against the unseen chains which seemed to hold him to the earth. Even as he thought of the paralysis a glancing blow on the head might induce, something seemed to snap and he rolled free. Rolled is hardly the word: he seemed almost to dart to the rifle that lay across the rock, so light his limbs felt.

Dropping behind the stone he seized the weapon. He did not even have to lift it. As it lay it bore directly on the man who was now approaching.

His hand was momentarily halted by Esau Brill's strange behavior. Instead of firing or leaping back into cover the man came straight on, his rifle in the crook of his arm, that damnable leer still on his unshaven lips. Was he mad? Could he not see that his enemy was up again, raging with life, and with a cocked rifle at his heart? Brill seemed not to be looking at him, but to one side, at the spot where Reynolds had just been lying.

Without seeking further for the explanation of his foe's actions, Cal Reynolds pulled the trigger. With the vicious spang of the report a blue shred leaped from Brill's broad breast. He staggered back, his mouth flying open. And the look on his face froze Reynolds again. Esau Brill came of a breed which fights to its last gasp. Nothing was more certain than that he would go down pulling the trigger blindly until the last red vestige of life left him. Yet the ferocious triumph was wiped from his face with the crack of the shot, to be replaced by an awful expression of dazed surprize. He made no move to lift his rifle, which slipped from his grasp, nor did he clutch at his wound. Throwing out his hands in a strange, stunned, helpless way, he reeled backward on slowly buckling legs, his features frozen into a mask of stupid amazement that made his watcher shiver with its cosmic horror.

Through the opened lips gushed a tide of blood, dyeing the damp shirt. And like a tree that sways and rushes suddenly earthward,

Esau Brill crashed down among the mesquite-grass and lay motionless.

Cal Reynolds rose, leaving the rifle where it lay. The rolling grass-grown hills swam misty and indistinct to his gaze. Even the sky and the blazing sun had a hazy unreal aspect. But a savage content was in his soul. The long feud was over at last, and whether he had taken his death-wound or not, he had sent Esau Brill to blaze the trail to hell ahead of him.

Then he started violently as his gaze wandered to the spot where he had rolled after being hit. He glared; were his eyes playing him tricks? Yonder in the grass Esau Brill lay dead – yet only a few feet away stretched another body.

Rigid with surprize, Reynolds glared at the rangy figure, slumped grotesquely beside the rocks. It lay partly on its side, as if flung there by some blind convulsion, the arms outstretched, the fingers crooked as if blindly clutching. The short-cropped sandy hair was splashed with blood, and from a ghastly hole in the temple the brains were oozing. From a corner of the mouth seeped a thin trickle of tobacco juice to stain the dusty neckcloth.

And as he gazed, an awful familiarity made itself evident. He knew the feel of those shiny leather wrist-bands; he knew with fearful certainty whose hands had buckled that gun-belt; the tang of that tobacco juice was still on his palate.

In one brief destroying instant he knew he was looking down at his own lifeless body. And with the knowledge came true oblivion.

OceanofPDF.com

Old Garfield's Heart

I was sitting on the porch when my grandfather hobbled out and sank down on his favorite chair with the cushioned seat, and began to stuff tobacco in his old corncob-pipe.

"I thought you'd be goin' to the dance," he said.

"I'm waiting for Doc Blaine," I answered. "I'm going over to old man Garfield's with him."

My grandfather sucked at his pipe awhile before he spoke again. "Old Jim purty bad off?"

"Doc says he hasn't a chance."

"Who's takin' care of him?"

"Joe Braxton – against Garfield's wishes. But somebody had to stay with him."

My grandfather sucked his pipe noisily, and watched the heat lightning playing away off up in the hills; then he said: "You think old Jim's the biggest liar in this county, don't you?"

"He tells some pretty tall tales," I admitted. "Some of the things he claimed he took part in, must have happened before he was born."

"I came from Tennesee to Texas in 1870," my grandfather said abruptly. "I saw this town of Lost Knob grow up from nothin'. There wasn't even a log-hut store here when I came. But old Jim Garfield was here, livin' in the same place he lives now, only then it was a log cabin. He don't look a day older now than he did the first time I saw him."

"You never mentioned that before," I said in some surprize.

"I knew you'd put it down to an old man's maunderin's," he answered. "Old Jim was the first white man to settle in this country. He built his cabin a good fifty miles west of the frontier. God knows how he done it, for these hills swarmed with Comanches then.

"I remember the first time I ever saw him. Even then everybody called him 'old Jim.'

"I remember him tellin' me the same tales he's told you – how he was at the battle of San Jacinto when he was a youngster, and how

he'd rode with Ewen Cameron and Jack Hayes. Only I believe him, and you don't."

"That was so long ago –" I protested.

"The last Indian raid through this country was in 1874," said my grandfather, engrossed in his own reminiscences. "I was in on that fight, and so was old Jim. I saw him knock old Yellow Tail off his mustang at seven hundred yards with a buffalo rifle.

"But before that I was with him in a fight up near the head of Locust Creek. A band of Comanches came down Mesquital, lootin' and burnin', rode through the hills and started back up Locust Creek, and a scout of us were hot on their heels. We ran on to them just at sundown in a mesquite flat. We killed seven of them, and the rest skinned out through the brush on foot. But three of our boys were killed, and Jim Garfield got a thrust in the breast with a lance.

"It was an awful wound. He lay like a dead man, and it seemed sure nobody could live after a wound like that. But an old Indian came out of the brush, and when we aimed our guns at him, he made the peace sign and spoke to us in Spanish. I don't know why the boys didn't shoot him in his tracks, because our blood was heated with the fightin' and killin', but somethin' about him made us hold our fire. He said he wasn't a Comanche, but was an old friend of Garfield's, and wanted to help him. He asked us to carry Jim into a clump of mesquite, and leave him alone with him, and to this day I don't know why we did, but we did. It was an awful time – the wounded moanin' and callin' for water, the starin' corpses strewn about the camp, night comin' on, and no way of knowin' that the Indians wouldn't return when dark fell.

"We made camp right there, because the horses were fagged out, and we watched all night, but the Comanches didn't come back. I don't know what went on out in the mesquite where Jim Garfield's body lay, because I never saw that strange Indian again; but durin' the night I kept hearin' a weird moanin' that wasn't made by the dyin' men, and an owl hooted from midnight till dawn.

"And at sunrise Jim Garfield came walkin' out of the mesquite, pale and haggard, but alive, and already the wound in his breast had closed and begun to heal. And since then he's never mentioned

that wound, nor that fight, nor the strange Indian who came and went so mysteriously. And he hasn't aged a bit; he looks now just like he did then – a man of about fifty."

In the silence that followed, a car began to purr down the road, and twin shafts of light cut through the dusk.

"That's Doc Blaine," I said. "When I come back I'll tell you how Garfield is."

Doc Blaine was prompt with his predictions as we drove the three miles of post-oak covered hills that lay between Lost Knob and the Garfield farm.

"I'll be surprized to find him alive," he said, "smashed up like he is. A man his age ought to have more sense than to try to break a young horse."

"He doesn't look so old," I remarked.

"I'll be fifty, my next birthday," answered Doc Blaine. "I've known him all my life, and he must have been at least fifty the first time I ever saw him. His looks are deceiving."

Old Garfield's dwelling-place was reminiscent of the past. The boards of the low squat house had never known paint. Orchard fence and corrals were built of rails.

Old Jim lay on his rude bed, tended crudely but efficiently by the man Doc Blaine had hired over the old man's protests. As I looked at him, I was impressed anew by his evident vitality. His frame was stooped but unwithered, his limbs rounded out with springy muscles. In his corded neck and in his face, drawn though it was with suffering, was apparent an innate virility. His eyes, though partly glazed with pain, burned with the same unquenchable element.

"He's been ravin'," said Joe Braxton stolidly.

"First white man in this country," muttered old Jim, becoming intelligible. "Hills no white man ever set foot in before. Gettin' too old. Have to settle down. Can't move on like I used to. Settle down here. Good country before it filled up with cow-men and squatters.

Wish Ewen Cameron could see this country. The Mexicans shot him. Damn 'em!"

Doc Blaine shook his head. "He's all smashed up inside. He won't live till daylight."

Garfield unexpectedly lifted his head and looked at us with clear eyes.

"Wrong, Doc," he wheezed, his breath whistling with pain. "I'll live. What's broken bones and twisted guts? Nothin'! It's the heart that counts. Long as the heart keeps pumpin', a man can't die. My heart's sound. Listen to it! Feel of it!"

He groped painfully for Doc Blaine's wrist, dragged his hand to his bosom and held it there, staring up into the doctor's face with avid intensity.

"Regular dynamo, ain't it?" he gasped. "Stronger'n a gasoline engine!"

Blaine beckoned me. "Lay your hand here," he said, placing my hand on the old man's bare breast. "He does have a remarkable heart action."

I noted, in the light of the coal-oil lamp, a great livid scar in the gaunt arching breast – such a scar as might be made by a flint-headed spear. I laid my hand directly on this scar, and an exclamation escaped my lips.

Under my hand old Jim Garfield's heart pulsed, but its throb was like no other heart action I have ever observed. Its power was astounding; his ribs vibrated to its steady throb. It felt more like the vibrating of a dynamo than the action of a human organ. I could feel its amazing vitality radiating from his breast, stealing up into my hand and up my arm, until my own heart seemed to speed up in response.

"I can't die," old Jim gasped. "Not so long as my heart's in my breast. Only a bullet through the brain can kill me. And even then I wouldn't be rightly dead, as long as my heart beats in my breast. Yet it ain't rightly mine, either. It belongs to Ghost Man, the Lipan chief. It was the heart of a god the Lipans worshipped before the Comanches drove 'em out of their native hills.

“I knew Ghost Man down on the Rio Grande, when I was with Ewen Cameron. I saved his life from the Mexicans once. He tied the string of ghost wampum between him and me – the wampum no man but me and him can see or feel. He came when he knowed I needed him, in that fight up on the headwaters of Locust Creek, when I got this scar.

“I was dead as a man can be. My heart was sliced in two, like the heart of a butchered beef steer.

“All night Ghost Man did magic, callin’ my ghost back from spirit-land. I remember that flight, a little. It was dark, and gray-like, and I drifted through gray mists and heard the dead wailin’ past me in the mist. But Ghost Man brought me back.

“He took out what was left of my mortal heart, and put the heart of the god in my bosom. But it’s his, and when I’m through with it, he’ll come for it. It’s kept me alive and strong for the lifetime of a man. Age can’t touch me. What do I care if these fools around here call me an old liar? What I know, I know. But hark’ee!”

His fingers became claws, clamping fiercely on Doc Blaine’s wrist. His old eyes, old yet strangely young, burned fierce as those of an eagle under his bushy brows.

“If by some mischance I *should* die, now or later, promise me this! Cut into my bosom and take out the heart Ghost Man lent me so long ago! It’s his. And as long as it beats in my body, my spirit’ll be tied to that body, though my head be crushed like an egg underfoot! A livin’ thing in a rottin’ body! Promise!”

“All right, I promise,” replied Doc Blaine, to humor him, and old Jim Garfield sank back with a whistling sigh of relief.

He did not die that night, nor the next, nor the next. I well remember the next day, because it was that day that I had the fight with Jack Kirby.

People will take a good deal from a bully, rather than to spill blood. Because nobody had gone to the trouble of killing him, Kirby thought the whole countryside was afraid of him.

He had bought a steer from my father, and when my father went to collect for it, Kirby told him that he had paid the money to me – which was a lie. I went looking for Kirby, and came upon him in a bootleg joint, boasting of his toughness, and telling the crowd that he was going to beat me up and make me say that he had paid me the money, and that I had stuck it into my own pocket. When I heard him say that, I saw red, and ran in on him with a stockman's knife, and cut him across the face, and in the neck, side, breast and belly, and the only thing that saved his life was the fact that the crowd pulled me off.

There was a preliminary hearing, and I was indicted on a charge of assault, and my trial was set for the following term of court. Kirby was as tough-fibered as a post-oak country bully ought to be, and he recovered, swearing vengeance, for he was vain of his looks, though God knows why, and I had permanently impaired them.

And while Jack Kirby was recovering, old man Garfield recovered too, to the amazement of everybody, especially Doc Blaine.

I well remember the night Doc Blaine took me again out to old Jim Garfield's farm. I was in Shifty Corlan's joint, trying to drink enough of the slop he called beer to get a kick out of it, when Doc Blaine came in and persuaded me to go with him.

As we drove along the winding old road in Doc's car, I asked: "Why are you insistent that I go with you this particular night? This isn't a professional call, is it?"

"No," he said. "You couldn't kill old Jim with a post-oak maul. He's completely recovered from injuries that ought to have killed an ox. To tell the truth, Jack Kirby is in Lost Knob, swearing he'll shoot you on sight."

"Well, for God's sake!" I exclaimed angrily. "Now everybody'll think I left town because I was afraid of him. Turn around and take me back, damn it!"

"Be reasonable," said Doc. "Everybody knows you're not afraid of Kirby. Nobody's afraid of him now. His bluff's broken, and that's why he's so wild against you. But you can't afford to have any more trouble with him now, and your trial only a short time off."

I laughed and said: “Well, if he’s looking for me hard enough, he can find me as easily at old Garfield’s as in town, because Shifty Corlan heard you say where we were going. And Shifty’s hated me ever since I skinned him in that horse-swap last fall. He’ll tell Kirby where I went.”

“I never thought of that,” said Doc Blaine, worried.

“Hell, forget it,” I advised. “Kirby hasn’t got guts enough to do anything but blow.”

But I was mistaken. Puncture a bully’s vanity and you touch his one vital spot.

Old Jim had not gone to bed when we got there. He was sitting in the room opening on to his sagging porch, the room which was at once living-room and bedroom, smoking his old cob pipe and trying to read a newspaper by the light of his coal-oil lamp. All the windows and doors were wide open for the coolness, and the insects which swarmed in and fluttered around the lamp didn’t seem to bother him.

We sat down and discussed the weather – which isn’t so inane as one might suppose, in a country where men’s livelihood depends on sun and rain, and is at the mercy of wind and drouth. The talk drifted into other kindred channels, and after some time, Doc Blaine bluntly spoke of something that hung in his mind.

“Jim,” he said, “that night I thought you were dying, you babbled a lot of stuff about your heart, and an Indian who lent you his. How much of that was delirium?”

“None, Doc,” said Garfield, pulling at his pipe. “It was gospel truth. Ghost Man, the Lipan priest of the Gods of Night, replaced my dead, torn heart with one from somethin’ he worshipped. I ain’t sure myself just what that somethin’ is – somethin’ from away back and a long way off, he said. But bein’ a god, it can do without its heart for awhile. But when I die – if I ever get my head smashed so my consciousness is destroyed – the heart must be given back to Ghost Man.”

“You mean you were in earnest about cutting out your heart?” demanded Doc Blaine.

“It has to be,” answered old Garfield. “A livin’ thing in a dead thing is opposed to nat’er. That’s what Ghost Man said.”

“Who the devil *was* Ghost Man?”

“I told you. A witch-doctor of the Lipans, who dwelt in this country before the Comanches came down from the Staked Plains and drove ’em south across the Rio Grande. I was a friend to ’em. I reckon Ghost Man is the only one left alive.”

“Alive? Now?”

“I dunno,” confessed old Jim. “I dunno whether he’s alive or dead. I dunno whether he was alive when he came to me after the fight on Locust Creek, or even if he was alive when I knowed him in the southern country. Alive as we understand life, I mean.”

“What balderdash is this?” demanded Doc Blaine uneasily, and I felt a slight stirring in my hair. Outside was stillness, and the stars, and the black shadows of the post-oak woods. The lamp cast old Garfield’s shadow grotesquely on the wall, so that it did not at all resemble that of a human, and his words were strange as words heard in a nightmare.

“I knowed you wouldn’t understand,” said old Jim. “I don’t understand myself, and I ain’t got the words to explain them things I feel and know without understandin’. The Lipans were kin to the Apaches, and the Apaches learnt curious things from the Pueblos. Ghost Man *was* – that’s all I can say – alive or dead, I don’t know, but he *was*. What’s more, he *is.”*

“Is it you or me that’s crazy?” asked Doc Blaine.

“Well,” said old Jim, “I’ll tell you this much – Ghost Man knew Coronado.”

“Crazy as a loon!” murmured Doc Blaine. Then he lifted his head. “What’s that?”

“Horse turning in from the road,” I said. “Sounds like it stopped.”

I stepped to the door, like a fool, and stood etched in the light behind me. I got a glimpse of a shadowy bulk I knew to be a man on

a horse; then Doc Blaine yelled: “Look out!” and threw himself against me, knocking us both sprawling. At the same instant I heard the smashing report of a rifle, and old Garfield grunted and fell heavily.

“Jack Kirby!” screamed Doc Blaine. “He’s killed Jim!”

I scrambled up, hearing the clatter of retreating hoofs, snatched old Jim’s shotgun from the wall, rushed recklessly out on to the sagging porch and let go both barrels at the fleeing shape, dim in the starlight. The charge was too light to kill at that range, but the bird-shot stung the horse and maddened him. He swerved, crashed headlong through a rail fence and charged across the orchard, and a peach tree limb knocked his rider out of the saddle. He never moved after he hit the ground. I ran out there and looked down at him. It was Jack Kirby, right enough, and his neck was broken like a rotten branch.

I let him lie, and ran back to the house. Doc Blaine had stretched old Garfield out on a bench he’d dragged in from the porch, and Doc’s face was whiter than I’d ever seen it. Old Jim was a ghastly sight; he had been shot with an old-fashioned .45-70, and at that range the heavy ball had literally torn off the top of his head. His features were masked with blood and brains. He had been directly behind me, poor old devil, and he had stopped the slug meant for me.

Doc Blaine was trembling, though he was anything but a stranger to such sights.

“Would you pronounce him dead?” he asked.

“That’s for you to say.” I answered. “But even a fool could tell that he’s dead.”

“He *is* dead,” said Doc Blaine in a strained unnatural voice. “Rigor mortis is already setting in. But feel his heart!”

I did, and cried out. The flesh was already cold and clammy; but beneath it that mysterious heart still hammered steadily away, like a dynamo in a deserted house. No blood coursed through those veins; yet the heart pounded, pounded, pounded, like the pulse of Eternity.

“A living thing in a dead thing,” whispered Doc Blaine, cold sweat on his face. “This is opposed to nature. I am going to keep the promise I made him. I’ll assume full responsibility. This is too monstrous to ignore.”

Our implements were a butcher-knife and a hack-saw. Outside only the still stars looked down on the black post-oak shadows and the dead man that lay in the orchard. Inside, the old lamp flickered, making strange shadows move and shiver and cringe in the corners, and glistened on the blood on the floor, and the red-dabbled figure on the bench. The only sound inside was the crunch of the saw-edge in bone; outside an owl began to hoot weirdly.

Doc Blaine thrust a red-stained hand into the aperture he had made, and drew out a red, pulsing object that caught the lamplight. With a choked cry he recoiled, and the thing slipped from his fingers and fell on the table. And I too cried out involuntarily. For it did not fall with a soft meaty thud, as a piece of flesh should fall. It *thumped* hard on the table.

Impelled by an irresistible urge, I bent and gingerly picked up old Garfield’s heart. The feel of it was brittle, unyielding, like steel or stone, but smoother than either. In size and shape it was the duplicate of a human heart, but it was slick and smooth, and its crimson surface reflected the lamplight like a jewel more lambent than any ruby; and in my hand it still throbbed mightily, sending vibratory radiations of energy up my arm until my own heart seemed swelling and bursting in response. It was cosmic *power*, beyond my comprehension, concentrated into the likeness of a human heart.

The thought came to me that here was a dynamo of life, the nearest approach to immortality that is possible for the destructible human body, the materialization of a cosmic secret more wonderful than the fabulous fountain sought for by Ponce de Leon. My soul was drawn into that unterrestrial gleam, and I suddenly wished passionately that it hammered and thundered in my own bosom in place of my paltry heart of tissue and muscle.

Doc Blaine ejaculated incoherently. I wheeled.

The noise of his coming had been no greater than the whispering of a night wind through the corn. There in the doorway he stood, tall, dark, inscrutable – an Indian warrior, in the paint, war bonnet, breech-clout and moccasins of an elder age. His dark eyes burned like fires gleaming deep under fathomless black lakes. Silently he extended his hand, and I dropped Jim Garfield's heart into it. Then without a word he turned and stalked into the night. But when Doc Blaine and I rushed out into the yard an instant later, there was no sign of any human being. He had vanished like a phantom of the night, and only something that looked like an owl was flying, dwindling from sight, into the rising moon.

OceanofPDF.com

Vultures of Wahpeton

I

Guns in the Dark

The bare plank walls of the Golden Eagle Saloon seemed still to vibrate with the crashing echoes of the guns which had split the sudden darkness with spurts of red. But only a nervous shuffling of booted feet sounded in the tense silence that followed the shots. Then somewhere a match rasped on leather and a yellow flicker sprang up, etching a shaky hand and a pallid face. An instant later an oil lamp with a broken chimney illuminated the saloon, throwing tense bearded faces into bold relief. The big lamp that hung from the ceiling was a smashed ruin; kerosene dripped from it to the floor, making an oily puddle beside a grimmer, darker pool.

Two figures held the center of the room, under the broken lamp. One lay face-down, motionless arms outstretching empty hands. The other was crawling to his feet, blinking and gaping stupidly, like a man whose wits are still muddled by drink. His right arm hung limply by his side, a long-barreled pistol sagging from his fingers.

The rigid line of figures along the bar melted into movement. Men came forward, stooping to stare down at the limp shape. A confused babble of conversation rose. Hurried steps sounded outside, and the crowd divided as a man pushed his way abruptly through. Instantly he dominated the scene. His broad-shouldered, trim-hipped figure was above medium height, and his broad-brimmed white hat, neat boots and cravat contrasted with the rough garb of the others, just as his keen, dark face with its narrow black mustache contrasted with the bearded countenances about him. He held an ivory-butted gun in his right hand, muzzle tilted upward.

“What devil’s work is this?” he harshly demanded; and then his gaze fell on the man on the floor. His eyes widened.

“Grimes!” he ejaculated. “Jim Grimes, my deputy! Who did this?” There was something tigerish about him as he wheeled toward the uneasy crowd. “Who did this?” he demanded, half crouching, his

gun still lifted, but seeming to hover like a live thing ready to swoop.

Feet shuffled as men backed away, but one man spoke up: “We don’t know, Middleton. Jackson there was havin’ a little fun, shootin’ at the ceilin’, and the rest of us was at the bar, watchin’ him, when Grimes come in and started to arrest him –”

“So Jackson shot him!” snarled Middleton, his gun covering the befuddled one in a baffling blur of motion. Jackson yelped in fear and threw up his hands, and the man who had first spoken interposed.

“No, Sheriff, it couldn’t have been Jackson. His gun was empty when the lights went out. I know he slung six bullets into the ceilin’ while he was playin’ the fool, and I heard him snap the gun three times afterwards, so I know it was empty. But when Grimes went up to him, somebody shot the light out, and a gun banged in the dark, and when we got a light on again, there Grimes was on the floor, and Jackson was just gettin’ up.”

“I didn’t shoot him,” muttered Jackson. “I was just havin’ a little fun. I was drunk, but I ain’t now. I wouldn’t have resisted arrest. When the light went out I didn’t know what had happened. I heard the gun bang, and Grimes dragged me down with him as he fell. I didn’t shoot him. I dunno who did.”

“None of us knows,” added a bearded miner. “Somebody shot in the dark –”

“More’n one,” muttered another. “I heard at least three or four guns speakin’.”

Silence followed, in which each man looked sidewise at his neighbor. The men had drawn back to the bar, leaving the middle of the big room clear, where the sheriff stood. Suspicion and fear galvanized the crowd, leaping like an electric spark from man to man. Each man knew that a murderer stood near him, possibly at his elbow. Men refused to look directly into the eyes of their neighbors, fearing to surprise guilty knowledge there – and die for the discovery. They stared at the sheriff who stood facing them, as if expecting to see him fall suddenly before a blast from the same unknown guns that had mowed down his deputy.

———

Middleton's steely eyes ranged along the silent line of men. Their eyes avoided or gave back his stare. In some he read fear; some were inscrutable; in others flickered a sinister mockery.

"The men who killed Jim Grimes are in this saloon," he said finally. "Some of you are the murderers." He was careful not to let his eyes single out anyone when he spoke; they swept the whole assemblage.

"I've been expecting this. Things have been getting a little too hot for the robbers and murderers who have been terrorizing this camp, so they've started shooting my deputies in the back. I suppose you'll try to kill me, next. Well, I want to tell you sneaking rats, whoever you are, that I'm ready for you, any time."

He fell silent, his rangy frame tense, his eyes burning with watchful alertness. None moved. The men along the bar might have been figures cut from stone.

He relaxed and shoved his gun into its scabbard; a sneer twisted his lips.

"I know your breed. You won't shoot a man unless his back is toward you. Forty men have been murdered in the vicinity of this camp within the last year, and not one had a chance to defend himself.

"Maybe this killing is an ultimatum to me. All right; I've got an answer ready: I've got a new deputy, and you won't find him so easy as Grimes. I'm fighting fire with fire from here on. I'm riding out of the Gulch early in the morning, and when I come back, I'll have a man with me. A gunfighter from Texas!"

He paused to let this information sink in, and laughed grimly at the furtive glances that darted from man to man.

"You'll find him no lamb," he predicted vindictively. "He was too wild for the country where gun-throwing was invented. What he did down there is none of my business. What he'll do here is what counts. And all I ask is that the men who murdered Grimes here, try that same trick on this Texan.

“Another thing, on my own account. I’m meeting this man at Ogalala Spring tomorrow morning. I’ll be riding out alone, at dawn. If anybody wants to try to waylay me, let him make his plans now! I’ll follow the open trail, and anyone who has any business with me will find me ready.”

And turning his trimly-tailored back scornfully on the throng at the bar, the sheriff of Wahpeton strode from the saloon.

Ten miles east of Wahpeton a man squatted on his heels, frying strips of deer meat over a tiny fire. The sun was just coming up. A short distance away a rangy mustang nibbled at the wiry grass that grew sparsely between broken rocks. The man had camped there that night, but his saddle and blanket were hidden back in the bushes. That fact showed him to be a man of wary nature. No one following the trail that led past Ogalala Spring could have seen him as he slept among the bushes. Now, in full daylight, he was making no attempt to conceal his presence.

The man was tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, like one who had spent his life in the saddle. His unruly black hair matched a face burned dark by the sun, but his eyes were a burning blue. Low on either hip the black butt of a heavy Colt jutted from a worn black leather scabbard. These guns seemed as much part of the man as his eyes or his hands. He had worn them so constantly and so long that their association was as natural as the use of his limbs.

As he fried his meat and watched his coffee boiling in a battered old pot, his gaze darted continually eastward where the trail crossed a wide open space before it vanished among the thickets of a broken hill country. Westward the trail mounted a gentle slope and quickly disappeared among trees and bushes that crowded up within a few yards of the spring. But it was always eastward that the man looked.

When a rider emerged from the thickets to the east, the man at the spring set aside the skillet with its sizzling meat strips, and picked up his rifle – a long range Sharps .50. His eyes narrowed with satisfaction. He did not rise, but remained on one knee, the

rifle resting negligently in his hands, the muzzle tilted upward, not aimed.

The rider came straight on, and the man at the spring watched him from under the brim of his hat. Only when the stranger pulled up a few yards away did the first man lift his head and give the other a full view of his face.

The horseman was a supple youth of medium height, and his hat did not conceal the fact that his hair was yellow and curly. His wide eyes were ingenuous, and an infectious smile curved his lips. There was no rifle under his knee, but an ivory-butted .45 hung low at his right hip.

His expression as he saw the other man's face gave no hint to his reaction, except for a slight, momentary contraction of the muscles that control the eyes – a movement involuntary and all but uncontrollable. Then he grinned broadly, and hailed:

"That meat smells prime, stranger!"

"Light and help me with it," invited the other instantly. "Coffee, too, if you don't mind drinkin' out of the pot."

He laid aside the rifle as the other swung from his saddle. The blond youngster threw his reins over the horse's head, fumbled in his blanket roll and drew out a battered tin cup. Holding this in his right hand he approached the fire with the rolling gait of a man born to a horse.

"I ain't et my breakfast," he admitted. "Camped down the trail a piece last night, and come on up here early to meet a man. Thought you was the *hombre* till you looked up. Kinda startled me," he added frankly. He sat down opposite the taller man, who shoved the skillet and coffee pot toward him. The tall man moved both these utensils with his left hand. His right rested lightly and apparently casually on his right thigh.

The youth filled his tin cup, drank the black, unsweetened coffee with evident enjoyment, and filled the cup again. He picked out pieces of the cooling meat with his fingers – and he was careful to use only his left hand for that part of the breakfast that would leave grease on his fingers. But he used his right hand for pouring coffee

and holding the cup to his lips. He did not seem to notice the position of the other's right hand.

"Name's Glanton," he confided. "Billy Glanton. Texas. Guadalupe country. Went up the trail with a herd of mossy horns, went broke buckin' faro in Hayes City, and headed west lookin' for gold. Hell of a prospector I turned out to be! Now I'm lookin' for a job, and the man I was goin' to meet here said he had one for me. If I read your marks right you're a Texan, too?"

The last sentence was more a statement than a question.

"That's my brand," grunted the other. "Name's O'Donnell. Pecos River country, originally."

His statement, like that of Glanton, was indefinite. Both the Pecos and the Guadalupe cover considerable areas of territory. But Glanton grinned boyishly and stuck out his hand.

"Shake!" he cried. "I'm glad to meet an *hombre* from my home state, even if our stampin' grounds down there are a right smart piece apart!"

Their hands met and locked briefly – brown, sinewy hands that had never worn gloves, and that gripped with the abrupt tension of steel springs.

The hand-shake seemed to relax O'Donnell. When he poured out another cup of coffee he held the cup in one hand and the pot in the other, instead of setting the cup on the ground beside him and pouring with his left hand.

"I've been in California," he volunteered. "Drifted back on this side of the mountains a month ago. Been in Wahpeton for the last few weeks, but gold huntin' ain't my style. I'm a *vaquero*. Never should have tried to be anything else. I'm headin' back for Texas."

"Why don't you try Kansas?" asked Glanton. "It's fillin' up with Texas men, bringin' cattle up the trail to stock the ranges. Within a year they'll be drivin' 'em into Wyoming and Montana."

"Maybe I might." O'Donnell lifted the coffee cup absently. He held it in his left hand, and his right lay in his lap, almost touching the big black pistol butt. But the tension was gone out of his frame. He seemed relaxed, absorbed in what Glanton was saying. The use of

his left hand and the position of his right seemed mechanical, merely an unconscious habit.

"It's a great country," declared Glanton, lowering his head to conceal the momentary and uncontrollable flicker of triumph in his eyes. "Fine ranges. Towns springin' up wherever the railroad touches.

"Everybody gettin' rich on Texas beef. Talkin' about 'cattle kings'! Wish I could have knowed this beef boom was comin' when I was a kid! I'd have rounded up about fifty thousand of them maverick steers that was roamin' loose all over lower Texas, and put me a brand on 'em, and saved 'em for the market!" He laughed at his own conceit.

"They wasn't worth six bits a head then," he added, as men in making small talk will state a fact well known to everyone. "Now twenty dollars a head ain't the top price."

He emptied his cup and set it on the ground near his right hip. His easy flow of speech flowed on – but the natural movement of his hand away from the cup turned into a blur of speed that flicked the heavy gun from its scabbard.

Two shots roared like one long stuttering detonation.

The blond newcomer slumped sidewise, his smoking gun falling from his fingers, a widening spot of crimson suddenly dyeing his shirt, his wide eyes fixed in sardonic self-mockery on the gun in O'Donnell's right hand.

"Corcoran!" he muttered. "I thought I had you fooled – you –"

Self-mocking laughter bubbled to his lips, cynical to the last; he was laughing as he died.

The man whose real name was Corcoran rose and looked down at his victim unemotionally. There was a hole in the side of his shirt, and a seared spot on the skin of his ribs burned like fire. Even with his aim spoiled by ripping lead, Glanton's bullet had passed close.

Reloading the empty chamber of his Colt, Corcoran started toward the horse the dead man had ridden up to the spring. He had taken

but one step when a sound brought him around, the heavy Colt jumping back into his hand.

He scowled at the man who stood before him: a tall man, trimly built, and clad in frontier elegance.

"Don't shoot," this man said imperturbably. "I'm John Middleton, sheriff of Wahpeton Gulch."

The warning attitude of the other did not relax.

"This was a private matter," he said.

"I guessed as much. Anyway, it's none of my business. I saw two men at the spring as I rode over a rise in the trail some distance back. I was only expecting one. I can't afford to take any chance. I left my horse a short distance back and came on afoot. I was watching from the bushes and saw the whole thing. He reached for his gun first, but you already had your hand almost on your gun. Your shot was first by a flicker. He fooled me. His move came as an absolute surprise to me."

"He thought it would to me," said Corcoran. "Billy Glanton always wanted the drop on his man. He always tried to get some advantage before he pulled his gun.

"He knew me as soon as he saw me; knew that I knew him. But he thought he was making me think that he didn't know me. I made him think that. He could take chances because he knew I wouldn't shoot him down without warnin' – which is just what he figured on doin' to me. Finally he thought he had me off my guard, and went for his gun. I was foolin' him all along."

Middleton looked at Corcoran with much interest. He was familiar with the two opposite breeds of gunmen. One kind was like Glanton; utterly cynical, courageous enough when courage was necessary, but always preferring to gain an advantage by treachery whenever possible. Corcoran typified the opposite breed; men too direct by nature, or too proud of their skill to resort to trickery when it was possible to meet their enemies in the open and rely on sheer speed and nerve and accuracy. But that Corcoran was a strategist was proved by his tricking Glanton into drawing.

Middleton looked down at Glanton; in death the yellow curls and boyish features gave the youthful gunman an appearance of

innocence. But Middleton knew that that mask had covered the heart of a merciless grey wolf.

"A bad man!" he muttered, staring at the rows of niches on the ivory stock of Glanton's Colt.

"Plenty bad," agreed Corcoran. "My folks and his had a feud between 'em down in Texas. He came back from Kansas and killed an uncle of mine – shot him down in cold blood. I was in California when it happened. Got a letter a year after the feud was over. I was headin' for Kansas, where I figured he'd gone back to, when I met a man who told me he was in this part of the country, and was ridin' towards Wahpeton. I cut his trail and camped here last night waitin' for him.

"It'd been years since we'd seen each other, but he knew me – didn't know I knew he knew me, though. That gave me the edge. You're the man he was goin' to meet here?"

"Yes. I need a gunfighting deputy bad. I'd heard of him. Sent him word."

Middleton's gaze wandered over Corcoran's hard frame, lingering on the guns at his hips.

"You pack two irons," remarked the sheriff. "I know what you can do with your right. But what about the left? I've seen plenty of men who wore two guns, but those who could use both I can count on my fingers."

"Well?"

"Well," smiled the sheriff, "I thought maybe you'd like to show what you can do with your left."

"Why do you think it makes any difference to me whether you believe I can handle both guns or not?" retorted Corcoran without heat.

Middleton seemed to like the reply.

"A tin-horn would be anxious to make me believe he could. You don't have to prove anything to me. I've seen enough to show me that you're the man I need. Corcoran, I came out here to hire Glanton as my deputy. I'll make the same proposition to you. What

you were down in Texas, or out in California, makes no difference to me. I know your breed, and I know that you'll shoot square with a man who trusts you, regardless of what you may have been in other parts, or will be again, somewhere else.

"I'm up against a situation in Wahpeton that I can't cope with alone, or with the forces I have.

"For a year the town and the camps up and down the gulch have been terrorized by a gang of outlaws who call themselves the Vultures.

"That describes them perfectly. No man's life or property is safe. Forty or fifty men have been murdered, hundreds robbed. It's next to impossible for a man to pack out any dust, or for a big shipment of gold to get through on the stage. So many men have been shot trying to protect shipments that the stage company has trouble hiring guards any more.

"Nobody knows who are the leaders of the gang. There are a number of ruffians who are suspected of being members of the Vultures, but we have no proof that would stand up, even in a miners' court. Nobody dares give evidence against any of them. When a man recognizes the men who rob him he doesn't dare reveal his knowledge. I can't get anyone to identify a criminal, though I know that robbers and murderers are walking the streets, and rubbing elbows with me along the bars. It's maddening! And yet I can't blame the poor devils. Any man who dared testify against one of them would be murdered.

"People blame me some, but I can't give adequate protection to the camp with the resources allowed me. You know how a gold camp is; everybody so greedy-blind they don't want to do anything but grab for the yellow dust. My deputies are brave men, but they can't be everywhere, and they're not gunfighters. If I arrest a man there are a dozen to stand up in a miners' court and swear enough lies to acquit him. Only last night they murdered one of my deputies, Jim Grimes, in cold blood.

"I sent for Billy Glanton when I heard he was in this country, because I need a man of more than usual skill. I need a man who

can handle a gun like a streak of forked lightning, and knows all the tricks of trapping and killing a man. I'm tired of arresting criminals to be turned loose! Wild Bill Hickok has the right idea – kill the badmen and save the jails for the petty offenders!"

The Texan scowled slightly at the mention of Hickok, who was not loved by the riders who came up the cattle trails, but he nodded agreement with the sentiment expressed. The fact that he, himself, would fall into Hickok's category of those to be exterminated did not prejudice his viewpoint.

"You're a better man than Glanton," said Middleton abruptly. "The proof is that Glanton lies there dead, and here you stand very much alive. I'll offer you the same terms I meant to offer him."

He named a monthly salary considerably larger than that drawn by the average Eastern city marshal. Gold was the most plentiful commodity in Wahpeton.

"And a monthly bonus," added Middleton. "When I hire talent I expect to pay for it; so do the merchants and miners who look to me for protection." Corcoran meditated a moment.

"No use in me goin' on to Kansas now," he said finally. "None of my folks in Texas are havin' any feud that I know of. I'd like to see this Wahpeton. I'll take you up."

"Good!" Middleton extended his hand and as Corcoran took it he noticed that it was much browner than the left. No glove had covered that hand for many years.

"Let's get it started right away! But first we'll have to dispose of Glanton's body."

"I'll take along his gun and horse and send 'em to Texas to his folks," said Corcoran.

"But the body?"

"Hell, the buzzards'll 'tend to it."

"No, no!" protested Middleton. "Let's cover it with bushes and rocks, at least."

Corcoran shrugged his shoulders. It was not vindictiveness which prompted his seeming callousness. His hatred of the blond youth did not extend to the lifeless body of the man. It was simply that he saw no use in going to what seemed to him an unnecessary task. He had

hated Glanton with the merciless hate of his race, which is more enduring and more relentless than the hate of an Indian or a Spaniard. But toward the body that was no longer animated by the personality he had hated, he was simply indifferent. He expected some day to leave his own corpse stretched on the ground, and the thought of buzzards tearing at his dead flesh moved him no more than the sight of his dead enemy. His creed was pagan and nakedly elemental.

A man's body, once life had left it, was no more than any other carcass, moldering back into the soil which once produced it.

But he helped Middleton drag the body into an opening among the bushes, and build a rude cairn above it. And he waited patiently while Middleton carved the dead youth's name on a rude cross fashioned from broken branches, and thrust upright among the stones.

Then they rode for Wahpeton, Corcoran leading the riderless roan; over the horn of the empty saddle hung the belt supporting the dead man's gun, the ivory stock of which bore eleven notches, each of which represented a man's life.

II
Golden Madness

The mining town of Wahpeton sprawled in a wide gulch that wandered between sheer rock walls and steep hillsides. Cabins, saloons and dance-halls backed against the cliffs on the south side of the gulch. The houses facing them were almost on the bank of Wahpeton Creek, which wandered down the gulch, keeping mostly to the center. On both sides of the creek cabins and tents straggled for a mile and a half each way from the main body of the town. Men were washing gold dust out of the creek, and out of its smaller tributaries which meandered into the canyon along tortuous ravines. Some of these ravines opened into the gulch between the houses built against the wall, and the cabins and tents which straggled up them gave the impression that the town had overflowed the main gulch and spilled into its tributaries.

Buildings were of logs, or of bare planks laboriously freighted over the mountains. Squalor and draggled or gaudy elegance rubbed elbows. An intense virility surged through the scene. What other qualities it might have lacked, it overflowed with a superabundance of vitality. Color, action, movement – growth and power! The atmosphere was alive with these elements, stinging and tingling. Here there were no delicate shadings or subtle contrasts. Life painted here in broad, raw colors, in bold, vivid strokes. Men who came here left behind them the delicate nuances, the cultured tranquilities of life. An empire was being built on muscle and guts and audacity, and men dreamed gigantically and wrought terrifically. No dream was too mad, no enterprise too tremendous to be accomplished.

Passions ran raw and turbulent. Boot heels stamped on bare plank floors, in the eddying dust of the street. Voices boomed, tempers exploded in sudden outbursts of primitive violence. Shrill voices of painted harpies mingled with the clank of gold on gambling tables, gusty mirth and vociferous altercation along the bars where raw liquor hissed in a steady stream down hairy, dust-caked throats. It was one of a thousand similar panoramas of the day, when a giant empire was bellowing in lusty infancy.

But a sinister undercurrent was apparent. Corcoran, riding by the sheriff, was aware of this, his senses and intuitions whetted to razor keenness by the life he led. The instincts of a gunfighter were developed to an abnormal alertness, else he had never lived out his first year of gunmanship. But it took no abnormally developed instinct to tell Corcoran that hidden currents ran here, darkly and strongly.

As they threaded their way among trains of pack-mules, rumbling wagons and swarms of men on foot which thronged the straggling street, Corcoran was aware of many eyes following them. Talk ceased suddenly among gesticulating groups as they recognized the sheriff, then the eyes swung to Corcoran, searching and appraising. He did not seem to be aware of their scrutiny.

Middleton murmured: “They know I’m bringing back a gunfighting deputy. Some of those fellows are Vultures, though I can’t prove it. Look out for yourself.”

Corcoran considered this advice too unnecessary to merit a reply. They were riding past the King of Diamonds gambling hall at the moment, and a group of men clustered in the doorway turned to stare at them. One lifted a hand in greeting to the sheriff.

“Ace Brent, the biggest gambler in the gulch,” murmured Middleton as he returned the salute. Corcoran got a glimpse of a slim figure in elegant broadcloth, a keen, inscrutable countenance, and a pair of piercing black eyes.

Middleton did not enlarge upon his description of the man, but rode on in silence.

They traversed the body of the town – the clusters of stores and saloons – and passed on, halting at a cabin apart from the rest.

Between it and the town the creek swung out in a wide loop that carried it some distance from the south wall of the gulch, and the cabins and tents straggled after the creek. That left this particular cabin isolated, for it was built with its back wall squarely against the sheer cliff. There was a corral on one side, a clump of trees on the other. Beyond the trees a narrow ravine opened into the gulch, dry and unoccupied.

"This is my cabin," said Middleton. "That cabin back there" – he pointed to one which they had passed, a few hundred yards back up the road – "I use for a sheriff's office. I need only one room. You can bunk in the back room. You can keep your horse in my corral, if you want to. I always keep several there for my deputies. It pays to have a fresh supply of horseflesh always on hand."

As Corcoran dismounted he glanced back at the cabin he was to occupy. It stood close to a clump of trees, perhaps a hundred yards from the steep wall of the gulch.

There were four men at the sheriff's cabin, one of which Middleton introduced to Corcoran as Colonel Hopkins, formerly of Tennessee. He was a tall, portly man with an iron grey mustache and goatee, as well dressed as Middleton himself.

"Colonel Hopkins owns the rich Elinor A. claim, in partnership with Dick Bisley," said Middleton, "in addition to being one of the most prominent merchants in the Gulch."

"A great deal of good either occupation does me, when I can't get my money out of town," retorted the colonel. "Three times my partner and I have lost big shipments of gold on the stage. Once we sent out a load concealed in wagons loaded with supplies supposed to be intended for the miners at Teton Gulch. Once clear of Wahpeton the drivers were to swing back east through the mountains. But somehow the Vultures learned of our plan; they caught the wagons fifteen miles south of Wahpeton, looted them and murdered the guards and drivers."

"The town's honeycombed with their spies," muttered Middleton.

"Of course. One doesn't know who to trust. It was being whispered in the streets that my men had been killed and robbed, before their bodies had been found. We know that the Vultures

knew all about our plan, that they rode straight out from Wahpeton, committed that crime and rode straight back with the gold dust. But we could do nothing. We can't prove anything, or convict anybody."

Middleton introduced Corcoran to the three deputies, Bill McNab, Richardson, and Stark. McNab was as tall as Corcoran and more heavily built, hairy and muscular, with restless eyes that reflected a violent temper. Richardson was more slender, with cold, unblinking eyes, and Corcoran instantly classified him as the most dangerous of the three. Stark was a burly, bearded fellow, not differing in type from hundreds of miners. Corcoran found the appearances of these men incongruous with their protestations of helplessness in the face of the odds against them. They looked like hard men, well able to take care of themselves in any situation.

Middleton, as if sensing his thoughts, said: "These men are not afraid of the devil, and they can throw a gun as quick as the average man, or quicker. But it's hard for a stranger to appreciate just what we're up against here in Wahpeton. If it was a matter of an open fight, it would be different. I wouldn't need any more help. But it's blind going, working in the dark, not knowing who to trust. I don't dare to deputize a man unless I'm sure of his honesty. And who can be sure of who? We know the town is full of spies. We don't know who they are; we don't know who the leader of the Vultures is."

Hopkins' bearded chin jutted stubbornly as he said: "I still believe that gambler, Ace Brent, is mixed up with the gang. Gamblers have been murdered and robbed, but Brent's never been molested. What becomes of all the dust he wins? Many of the miners, despairing of ever getting out of the gulch with their gold, blow it all in the saloons and gambling halls. Brent's won thousands of dollars in dust and nuggets. So have several others. What becomes of it? It doesn't all go back into circulation. I believe they get it out, over the mountains. And if they do, when no one else can, that proves to my mind that they're members of the Vultures."

"Maybe they cache it, like you and the other merchants are doing," suggested Middleton. "I don't know. Brent's intelligent

enough to be the chief of the Vultures. But I've never been able to get anything on him."

"You've never been able to get anything definite on anybody, except petty offenders," said Colonel Hopkins bluntly, as he took up his hat. "No offense intended, John. We know what you're up against, and we can't blame you. But it looks like, for the good of the camp, we're going to have to take direct action."

Middleton stared after the broadcloth-clad back as it receded from the cabin.

" 'We,' " he murmured. "That means the vigilantes – or rather the men who have been agitating a vigilante movement. I can understand their feelings, but I consider it an unwise move. In the first place, such an organization is itself outside the law, and would be playing into the hands of the lawless element. Then, what's to prevent outlaws from joining the vigilantes, and diverting it to suit their own ends?"

"Not a damned thing!" broke in McNab heatedly. "Colonel Hopkins and his friends are hot-headed. They expect too much from us. Hell, we're just ordinary workin' men. We do the best we can, but we ain't gun-slingers like this man Corcoran here."

Corcoran found himself mentally questioning the whole truth of this statement; Richardson had all the earmarks of a gunman, if he had ever seen one, and the Texan's experience in such matters ranged from the Pacific to the Gulf.

Middleton picked up his hat. "You boys scatter out through the camp. I'm going to take Corcoran around, when I've sworn him in and given him his badge, and introduce him to the leading men of the camp.

"I don't want any mistake, or any chance of mistake, about his standing. I've put you in a tight spot, Corcoran, I'll admit – boasting about the gun-fighting deputy I was going to get. But I'm confident that you can take care of yourself."

The eyes that had followed their ride down the street focused on the sheriff and his companion as they made their way on foot along the straggling street with its teeming saloons and gambling halls. Gamblers and bartenders were swamped with business, and

merchants were getting rich with all commodities selling at unheard-of prices. Wages for day-labor matched prices for groceries, for few men could be found to toil for a prosaic, set salary when their eyes were dazzled by visions of creeks fat with yellow dust and gorges crammed with nuggets. Some of those dreams were not disappointed; millions of dollars in virgin gold was being taken out of the claims up and down the gulch. But the finders frequently found it a golden weight hung to their necks to drag them down to a bloody death. Unseen, unknown, on furtive feet the human wolves stole among them, unerringly marking their prey and striking in the dark.

From saloon to saloon, dance hall to dance hall, where weary girls in tawdry finery allowed themselves to be tussled and hauled about by bear-like males who emptied sacks of gold-dust down the low necks of their dresses, Middleton piloted Corcoran, talking rapidly and incessantly. He pointed out men in the crowd and gave their names and status in the community, and introduced the Texan to the more important citizens of the camp.

All eyes followed Corcoran curiously. The day was still in the future when the northern ranges would be flooded by Texas cattle, driven by wiry Texas riders; but Texans were not unknown, even then, in the mining camps of the Northwest. In the first days of the gold rushes they had drifted in from the camps of California, to which, at a still earlier date, the Southwest had sent some of her staunchest and some of her most turbulent sons. And of late others had drifted in from the Kansas cattle towns along whose streets the lean riders were swaggering and fighting out feuds brought up from the far south country. Many in Wahpeton were familiar with the characteristics of the Texas breed, and all had heard tales of the fighting men bred among the live oaks and mesquites of that hot, turbulent country where racial traits met and clashed, and the traditions of the Old South mingled with those of the untamed West.

Here, then, was a lean grey wolf from that southern pack; some of the men looked their scowling animosity; but most merely looked, in the rôle of spectators, eager to witness the drama all felt imminent.

“You’re, primarily, to fight the Vultures, of course,” Middleton told Corcoran as they walked together down the street. “But that doesn’t mean you’re to overlook petty offenders. A lot of small-time crooks and bullies are so emboldened by the success of the big robbers that they think they can get away with things, too. If you see a man shooting up a saloon, take his gun away and throw him into jail to sober up. That’s the jail, up yonder at the other end of town. Don’t let men fight on the street or in saloons. Innocent bystanders get hurt.”

“All right.” Corcoran saw no harm in shooting up saloons or fighting in public places. In Texas few innocent bystanders were ever hurt, for there men sent their bullets straight to the mark intended. But he was ready to follow instructions.

“So much for the smaller fry. You know what to do with the really bad men. We’re not bringing any more murderers into court to be acquitted through their friends’ lies!”

III

Gunman’s Trap

Night had fallen over the roaring madness that was Wahpeton Gulch. Light streamed from the open doors of saloons and honky-tonks, and the gusts of noise that rushed out into the street smote the passers-by like the impact of a physical blow.

Corcoran traversed the street with the smooth, easy stride of perfectly poised muscles. He seemed to be looking straight ahead, but his eyes missed nothing on either side of him. As he passed each building in turn he analyzed the sounds that issued from the open door, and knew just how much was rough merriment and horse-play, recognized the elements of anger and menace when they edged some of the voices, and accurately appraised the extent and intensity of those emotions. A real gunfighter was not merely a man whose eye was truer, whose muscles were quicker than other men; he was a practical psychologist, a student of human nature, whose life depended on the correctness of his conclusions.

It was the Golden Garter dance hall that gave him his first job as a defender of law and order.

As he passed a startling clamor burst forth inside – strident feminine shrieks piercing a din of coarse masculine hilarity. Instantly he was through the door and elbowing a way through the crowd which was clustered about the center of the room. Men cursed and turned belligerently as they felt his elbows in their ribs, twisted their heads to threaten him, and then gave back as they recognized the new deputy.

Corcoran broke through into the open space the crowd ringed, and saw two women fighting like furies. One, a tall, fine blond girl, had bent a shrieking, biting, clawing Mexican girl back over a billiard table, and the crowd was yelling joyful encouragement to one or the other: “Give it to her, Glory!” “Slug her, gal!” “Hell, Conchita, bite her!”

The brown girl heeded this last bit of advice and followed it so energetically that Glory cried out sharply and jerked away her wrist, which dripped blood. In the grip of the hysterical frenzy which seizes women in such moments, she caught up a billiard ball and lifted it to crash it down on the head of her screaming captive.

Corcoran caught that uplifted wrist, and deftly flicked the ivory sphere from her fingers. Instantly she whirled on him like a tigress, her yellow hair falling in disorder over her shoulders, bared by the violence of the struggle, her eyes blazing. She lifted her hands toward his face, her fingers working spasmodically, at which some drunk bawled, with a shout of laughter: “Scratch his eyes out, Glory!”

Corcoran made no move to defend his features; he did not seem to see the white fingers twitching so near his face. He was staring into her furious face, and the candid admiration of his gaze seemed to confuse her, even in her anger. She dropped her hands but fell back on woman’s traditional weapon – her tongue.

“You’re Middleton’s new deputy! I might have expected you to butt in! Where are McNab and the rest? Drunk in some gutter? Is this the way you catch murderers? You lawmen are all alike – better at bullying girls than at catching outlaws!”

Corcoran stepped past her and picked up the hysterical Mexican girl. Conchita seeing that she was more frightened than hurt, scurried toward the back rooms, sobbing in rage and humiliation, and clutching about her the shreds of garments her enemy's tigerish attack had left her.

Corcoran looked again at Glory, who stood clenching and unclenching her white fists. She was still fermenting with anger, and furious at his intervention. No one in the crowd about them spoke; no one laughed, but all seemed to hold their breaths as she launched into another tirade. They knew Corcoran was a dangerous man, but they did not know the code by which he had been reared; did not know that Glory, or any other woman, was safe from violence at his hands, whatever her offense.

"Why don't you call McNab?" she sneered. "Judging from the way Middleton's deputies have been working, it will probably take three or four of you to drag one helpless girl to jail!"

"Who said anything about takin' you to jail?" Corcoran's gaze dwelt in fascination on her ruddy cheeks, the crimson of her full lips in startling contrast against the whiteness of her teeth. She shook her yellow hair back impatiently, as a spirited young animal might shake back its flowing mane.

"You're not arresting me?" She seemed startled, thrown into confusion by this unexpected statement.

"No. I just kept you from killin' that girl. If you'd brained her with that billiard ball I'd have had to arrest you."

"She lied about me!" Her wide eyes flashed, and her breast heaved again.

"That wasn't no excuse for makin' a public show of yourself," he answered without heat. "If ladies have got to fight, they ought to do it in private."

And so saying he turned away. A gusty exhalation of breath seemed to escape the crowd, and the tension vanished, as they turned to the bar. The incident was forgotten, merely a trifling episode in an existence crowded with violent incidents. Jovial masculine voices mingled with the shriller laughter of women, as glasses began to clink along the bar.

Glory hesitated, drawing her torn dress together over her bosom, then darted after Corcoran, who was moving toward the door. When she touched his arm he whipped about as quick as a cat, a hand flashing to a gun. She glimpsed a momentary gleam in his eyes as menacing and predatory as the threat that leaps in a panther's eyes. Then it was gone as he saw whose hand had touched him.

"She lied about me," Glory said, as if defending herself from a charge of misconduct. "She's a dirty little cat."

Corcoran looked her over from head to foot, as if he had not heard her; his blue eyes burned her like a physical fire.

She stammered in confusion. Direct and unveiled admiration was commonplace, but there was an elemental candor about the Texan such as she had never before encountered.

He broke in on her stammerings in a way that showed he had paid no attention to what she was saying.

"Let me buy you a drink. There's a table over there where we can sit down."

"No. I must go and put on another dress. I just wanted to say that I'm glad you kept me from killing Conchita. She's a slut, but I don't want her blood on my hands."

"All right."

She found it hard to make conversation with him, and could not have said why she wished to make conversation.

"McNab arrested me once," she said, irrelevantly, her eyes dilating as if at the memory of an injustice. "I slapped him for something he said. He was going to put me in jail for resisting an officer of the law! Middleton made him turn me loose."

"McNab must be a fool," said Corcoran slowly.

"He's mean; he's got a nasty temper, and he – what's that?"

Down the street sounded a fusillade of shots, a blurry voice yelling gleefully.

"Some fool shooting up a saloon," she murmured, and darted a strange glance at her companion, as if a drunk shooting into the air was an unusual occurrence in that wild mining camp.

“Middleton said that’s against the law,” he grunted, turning away.

“Wait!” she cried sharply, catching at him. But he was already moving through the door, and Glory stopped short as a hand fell lightly on her shoulder from behind. Turning her head she paled to see the keenly-chiselled face of Ace Brent. His hand lay gently on her shoulder, but there was a command and a blood-chilling threat in its touch. She shivered and stood still as a statue, as Corcoran, unaware of the drama being played behind him, disappeared into the street.

The racket was coming from the Blackfoot Chief Saloon, a few doors down, and on the same side of the street as the Golden Garter. With a few long strides Corcoran reached the door. But he did not rush in. He halted and swept his cool gaze deliberately over the interior. In the center of the saloon a roughly dressed man was reeling about, whooping and discharging a pistol into the ceiling, perilously close to the big oil lamp which hung there. The bar was lined with men, all bearded and uncouthly garbed, so it was impossible to tell which were ruffians and which were honest miners. All the men in the room were at the bar, with the exception of the drunken man.

Corcoran paid little heed to him as he came through the door, though he moved straight toward him, and to the tense watchers it seemed the Texan was looking at no one else. In reality, from the corner of his eye he was watching the men at the bar; and as he moved deliberately from the door, across the room, he distinguished the pose of honest curiosity from the tension of intended murder. He saw the three hands that gripped gun butts.

And as he, apparently ignorant of what was going on at the bar, stepped toward the man reeling in the center of the room, a gun jumped from its scabbard and pointed toward the lamp. And even as it moved, Corcoran moved quicker. His turn was a blur of motion too quick for the eye to follow and even as he turned his gun was burning red.

The man who had drawn died on his feet with his gun still pointed toward the ceiling, unfired. Another stood gaping, stunned, a pistol dangling in his fingers, for that fleeting tick of time; then as

he woke and whipped the gun up, hot lead ripped through his brain. A third gun spoke once as the owner fired wildly, and then he went to his knees under the blast of ripping lead, slumped over on the floor and lay twitching.

It was over in a flash, action so blurred with speed that not one of the watchers could ever tell just exactly what had happened. One instant Corcoran had been moving toward the man in the center of the room, the next both guns were blazing and three men were falling from the bar, crashing dead on the floor.

For an instant the scene held, Corcoran half crouching, guns held at his hips, facing the men who stood stunned along the bar. Wisps of blue smoke drifted from the muzzles of his guns, forming a misty veil through which his grim face looked, implacable and passionless as that of an image carved from granite. But his eyes blazed.

Shakily, moving like puppets on a string, the men at the bar lifted their hands clear of their waistline. Death hung on the crook of a finger for a shuddering tick of time. Then with a choking gasp the man who had played drunk made a stumbling rush toward the door. With a catlike wheel and stroke Corcoran crashed a gun barrel over his head and stretched him stunned and bleeding on the floor.

The Texan was facing the men at the bar again before any of them could have moved. He had not looked at the men on the floor since they had fallen.

"Well, *amigos!"* His voice was soft, but it was thick with killer's lust. "Why don't you-all keep the *baile* goin'? Ain't these *hombres* got no friends?"

Apparently they had not. No one made a move.

Realizing that the crisis had passed, that there was no more killing to be done just then, Corcoran straightened, shoving his guns back in his scabbards.

"Purty crude," he criticized. "I don't see how anybody could fall for a trick that stale. Man plays drunk and starts shootin' at the roof. Officer comes in to arrest him. When the officer's back's turned, somebody shoots out the light, and the drunk falls on the floor to get out of the line of fire. Three or four men planted along the bar start blazin' away in the dark at the place where they know the law's standin', and out of eighteen or twenty-four shots, some's bound to connect."

With a harsh laugh he stooped, grabbed the “drunk” by the collar and hauled him upright. The man staggered and stared wildly about him, blood dripping from the gash in his scalp.

“You got to come along to jail,” said Corcoran unemotionally. “Sheriff says it’s against the law to shoot up saloons. I ought to shoot you, but I ain’t in the habit of pluggin’ men with empty guns. Reckon you’ll be more value to the sheriff alive than dead, anyway.”

And propelling his dizzy charge, he strode out into the street. A crowd had gathered about the door, and they gave back suddenly. He saw a supple, feminine figure dart into the circle of light, which illumined the white face and golden hair of the girl Glory.

“Oh!” she exclaimed sharply. “Oh!” Her exclamation was almost drowned in a sudden clamor of voices as the men in the street realized what had happened in the Blackfoot Chief.

Corcoran felt her pluck at his sleeve as he passed her, heard her tense whisper.

“I was afraid – I tried to warn you – I’m glad they didn’t –”

A shadow of a smile touched his hard lips as he glanced down at her.

Then he was gone, striding down the street toward the jail, half pushing, half dragging his bewildered prisoner.

IV
The Madness That Blinds Men

Corcoran locked the door on the man who seemed utterly unable to realize just what had happened, and turned away, heading for the sheriff’s office at the other end of town. He kicked on the door of the jailer’s shack, a few yards from the jail, and roused that individual out of a slumber he believed was alcoholic, and informed him he had a prisoner in his care. The jailer seemed as surprised as the victim was.

No one had followed Corcoran to the jail, and the street was almost deserted, as the people jammed morbidly into the Blackfoot Chief to stare at the bodies and listen to conflicting stories as to just what had happened.

Colonel Hopkins came running up, breathlessly, to grab Corcoran's hand and pump it vigorously.

"By gad, sir, you have the real spirit! Guts! Speed! They tell me the loafers at the bar didn't even have time to dive for cover before it was over! I'll admit I'd ceased to expect much of John's deputies, but you've shown your metal! These fellows were undoubtedly Vultures. That Tom Deal, you've got in jail, I've suspected him for some time. We'll question him – make him tell us who the rest are, and who their leader is. Come in and have a drink, sir!"

"Thanks, but not just now. I'm goin' to find Middleton and report this business. His office ought to be closer to the jail. I don't think much of his jailer. When I get through reportin' I'm goin' back and guard that fellow myself."

Hopkins emitted more laudations, and then clapped the Texan on the back and darted away to take part in whatever informal inquest was being made, and Corcoran strode on through the emptying street. The fact that so much uproar was being made over the killing of three would-be murderers showed him how rare was a successful resistance to the Vultures. He shrugged his shoulders as he remembered feuds and range wars in his native Southwest: men falling like flies under the unerring drive of bullets on the open range and in the streets of Texas towns. But there all men were frontiersmen, sons and grandsons of frontiersmen; here, in the mining camps, the frontier element was only one of several elements, many drawn from sections where men had forgotten how to defend themselves through generations of law and order.

He saw a light spring up in the sheriff's cabin just before he reached it, and, with his mind on possible gunmen lurking in ambush – for they must have known he would go directly to the cabin from the jail – he swung about and approached the building by a route that would not take him across the bar of light pouring from the window. So it was that the man who came running noisily down the road passed him without seeing the Texan as he kept in the shadows of the cliff. The man was McNab; Corcoran knew him by his powerful build, his slouching carriage. And as he burst

through the door, his face was illuminated and Corcoran was amazed to see it contorted in a grimace of passion.

Voices rose inside the cabin, McNab's bull-like roar, thick with fury, and the calmer tones of Middleton. Corcoran hurried forward, and as he approached he heard McNab roar: "Damn you, Middleton, you've got a lot of explainin' to do! Why didn't you warn the boys he was a killer?"

At that moment Corcoran stepped into the cabin and demanded: "What's the trouble, McNab?"

The big deputy whirled with a feline snarl of rage, his eyes glaring with murderous madness as they recognized Corcoran.

"You damned –" A string of filthy expletives gushed from his thick lips as he ripped out his gun. Its muzzle had scarcely cleared leather when a Colt banged in Corcoran's right hand. McNab's gun clattered to the floor and he staggered back, grasping his right arm with his left hand, and cursing like a madman.

"What's the matter with you, you fool?" demanded Corcoran harshly. "Shut up! I did you a favor by not killin' you. If you wasn't a deputy I'd have drilled you through the head. But I will anyway, if you don't shut your dirty trap."

"You killed Breckman, Red Bill and Curly!" raved McNab; he looked like a wounded grizzly as he swayed there, blood trickling down his wrist and dripping off his fingers.

"Was that their names? Well, what about it?"

"Bill's drunk, Corcoran," interposed Middleton. "He goes crazy when he's full of liquor."

McNab's roar of fury shook the cabin. His eyes turned red and he swayed on his feet as if about to plunge at Middleton's throat.

"Drunk?" he bellowed. "You lie, Middleton! Damn you, what's your game? You sent your own men to death! Without warnin'!"

"His own men?" Corcoran's eyes were suddenly glittering slits. He stepped back and made a half turn so that he was facing both men; his hands became claws hovering over his gun-butts.

"Yes, his men!" snarled McNab. "You fool, he's the chief of the Vultures!"

An electric silence gripped the cabin. Middleton stood rigid, his empty hands hanging limp, knowing that his life hung on a thread no more substantial than a filament of morning dew. If he moved, if, when he spoke, his tone jarred on Corcoran's suspicious ears, guns would be roaring before a man could snap his fingers.

"Is that so?" Corcoran shot at him.

"Yes," Middleton said calmly, with no inflection in his voice that could be taken as a threat. "I'm chief of the Vultures."

Corcoran glared at him puzzled. "What's your game?" he demanded, his tone thick with the deadly instinct of his breed.

"That's what I want to know!" bawled McNab. "We killed Grimes for you, because he was catchin' on to things. And we set the same trap for this devil. He knew! He must have known! You warned him – told him all about it!"

"He told me nothin'," grated Corcoran. "He didn't have to. Nobody but a fool would have been caught in a trap like that. Middleton, before I blow you to hell, I want to know one thing: what good was it goin' to do you to bring me into Wahpeton, and have me killed the first night I was here?"

"I didn't bring you here for that," answered Middleton.

"Then what'd you bring him here for?" yelled McNab. "You told us –"

"I told you I was bringing a new deputy here, that was a gun-slinging fool," broke in Middleton. "That was the truth. That should have been warning enough."

"But we thought that was just talk, to fool the people," protested McNab bewilderedly. He sensed that he was beginning to be wound in a web he could not break.

"Did I tell you it was just talk?"

"No, but we thought –"

"I gave you no reason to think anything. The night when Grimes was killed I told everyone in the Golden Eagle that I was bringing in a Texas gunfighter as my deputy. I spoke the truth."

"But you wanted him killed, and –"

"I didn't. I didn't say a word about having him killed."

"But –"

“Did I?” Middleton pursued relentlessly. “Did I give you a definite order to kill Corcoran, to molest him in any way?”

Corcoran’s eyes were molten steel, burning into McNab’s soul. The befuddled giant scowled and floundered, vaguely realizing that he was being put in the wrong, but not understanding how, or why.

“No, you didn’t tell us to kill him in so many words; but you didn’t tell us to let him alone.”

“Do I have to tell you to let people alone to keep you from killing them? There are about three thousand people in this camp I’ve never given any definite orders about. Are you going out and kill them, and say you thought I meant you to do it, because I didn’t tell you not to?”

“Well, I–” McNab began apologetically, then burst out in righteous though bewildered wrath: “Damn it, it was the understandin’ that we’d get rid of deputies like that, who wasn’t on the inside. We thought you were bringin’ in an honest deputy to fool the folks, just like you hired Jim Grimes to fool ’em. We thought you was just makin’ a talk to the fools in the Golden Eagle. We thought you’d want him out of the way as quick as possible –”

“You drew your own conclusions and acted without my orders,” snapped Middleton. “That’s all that it amounts to. Naturally Corcoran defended himself. If I’d had any idea that you fools would try to murder him, I’d have passed the word to let him alone. I thought you understood my motives. I brought Corcoran in here to fool the people; yes. But he’s not a man like Jim Grimes. Corcoran is with us. He’ll clean out the thieves that are working outside our gang, and we’ll accomplish two things with one stroke: get rid of competition and make the miners think we’re on the level.”

McNab stood glaring at Middleton; three times he opened his mouth, and each time he shut it without speaking. He knew that an injustice had been done him; that a responsibility that was not rightfully his had been dumped on his brawny shoulders. But the subtle play of Middleton’s wits was beyond him; he did not know how to defend himself or make a countercharge.

“All right,” he snarled. “We’ll forget it. But the boys ain’t goin’ to forget how Corcoran shot down their pards. I’ll talk to ’em, though. Tom Deal’s got to be out of that jail before daylight. Hopkins is aimin’ to question him about the gang. I’ll stage a fake jail-break for him. But first I’ve got to get this arm dressed.” And he slouched out of the cabin and away through the darkness, a baffled giant, burning with murderous rage, but too tangled in a net of subtlety to know where or how or who to smite.

Back in the cabin Middleton faced Corcoran who still stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt, his fingers near his gun butts. A whimsical smile played on Middleton’s thin lips, and Corcoran smiled back, but it was the mirthless grin of a crouching panther.

“You can’t tangle me up with words like you did that big ox,” Corcoran said. “You let me walk into that trap. You knew your men were ribbin’ it up. You let ’em go ahead, when a word from you would have stopped it. You knew they’d think you wanted me killed, like Grimes, if you didn’t say nothin’. You let ’em think that, but you played safe by not givin’ any definite orders, so if anything went wrong, you could step out from under and shift the blame onto McNab.”

Middleton smiled appreciatively, and nodded coolly.

“That’s right. All of it. You’re no fool, Corcoran.”

Corcoran ripped out an oath, and this glimpse of the passionate nature that lurked under his inscrutable exterior was like a momentary glimpse of an enraged cougar, eyes blazing, spitting and snarling.

“Why?” he exclaimed. “Why did you plot all this for me? If you had a grudge against Glanton, I can understand why you’d rib up a trap for him, though you wouldn’t have had no more luck with him than you have with me. But you ain’t got no feud against me. I never saw you before this mornin’!”

“I have no feud with you; I had none with Glanton. But if Fate hadn’t thrown you into my path, it would have been Glanton who would have been ambushed in the Blackfoot Chief. Don’t you see, Corcoran? It was a test. I had to be sure you were the man I wanted.”

Corcoran scowled, puzzled himself now.

"What do you mean?"

"Sit down!" Middleton himself sat down on a nearby chair, unbuckled his gun-belt and threw it, with the heavy, holstered gun, onto a table, out of easy reach. Corcoran seated himself, but his vigilance did not relax, and his gaze rested on Middleton's left arm pit, where a second gun might be hidden.

"In the first place," said Middleton, his voice flowing tranquilly, but pitched too low to be heard outside the cabin, "I'm chief of the Vultures, as that fool said. I organized them, even before I was made sheriff. Killing a robber and murderer, who was working outside my gang, made the people of Wahpeton think I'd make a good sheriff. When they gave me the office, I saw what an advantage it would be to me and my gang.

"Our organization is air-tight. There are about fifty men in the gang. They are scattered throughout these mountains. Some pose as miners; some are gamblers – Ace Brent, for instance. He's my right-hand man. Some work in saloons, some clerk in stores. One of the regular drivers of the stage-line company is a Vulture, and so is a clerk of the company, and one of the men who works in the company's stables, tending the horses.

"With spies scattered all over the camp, I know who's trying to take out gold, and when. It's a cinch. We can't lose."

"I don't see how the camp stands for it," grunted Corcoran.

"Men are too crazy after gold to think about anything else. As long as a man isn't molested himself, he doesn't care much what happens to his neighbors. We are organized; they are not. We know who to trust; they don't. It can't last forever. Sooner or later the more intelligent citizens will organize themselves into a vigilante committee and sweep the gulch clean. But when that happens, I intend to be far away – with one man I can trust."

Corcoran nodded, comprehension beginning to gleam in his eyes.

"Already some men are talking vigilante. Colonel Hopkins, for instance. I encourage him as subtly as I can."

"Why, in the name of Satan?"

"To avert suspicion; and for another reason. The vigilantes will serve my purpose at the end."

"And your purpose is to skip out and leave the gang holdin' the sack!"

"Exactly! Look here!"

Taking the candle from the table, he led the way through a back room, where heavy shutters covered the one window. Shutting the door, he turned to the back wall and drew aside some skins which were hung over it. Setting the candle on a roughly hewed table, he fumbled at the logs, and a section swung outward, revealing a heavy plank door set in the solid rock against which the back wall of the cabin was built. It was braced with iron and showed a ponderous

lock. Middleton produced a key, and turned it in the lock, and pushed the door inward. He lifted the candle and revealed a small cave, lined and heaped with canvas and buckskin sacks. One of these sacks had burst open, and a golden stream caught the glints of the candle.

"Gold! Sacks and sacks of it!"

Corcoran caught his breath, and his eyes glittered like a wolf's in the candlelight. No man could visualize the contents of those bags unmoved. And the gold-madness had long ago entered Corcoran's veins, more powerfully than he had dreamed, even though he had followed the lure to California and back over the mountains again. The sight of that glittering heap, of those bulging sacks, sent his pulses pounding in his temples, and his hand unconsciously locked on the butt of a gun.

"There must be a million there!"

"Enough to require a good-sized mule-train to pack it out," answered Middleton. "You see why I have to have a man to help me the night I pull out. And I need a man like you. You're an outdoor man, hardened by wilderness travel. You're a frontiersman, a *vaquero*, a trail-driver. These men I lead are mostly rats that grew up in border towns – gamblers, thieves, barroom gladiators, saloon-bred gunmen, a few miners gone wrong. You can stand things that would kill any of them.

"The flight we'll have to make will be hard traveling. We'll have to leave the beaten trails and strike out through the mountains. They'll be sure to follow us, and we'll probably have to fight them off. Then there are Indians – Blackfeet and Crows; we may run into a war-party of them. I knew I had to have a fighting man of the keenest type; not only a fighting man, but a man bred on the frontier. That's why I sent for Glanton. But you're a better man than he was."

Corcoran frowned his suspicion.

"Why didn't you tell me all this at first?"

"Because I wanted to try you out. I wanted to be sure you were the right man. I had to be sure. If you were stupid enough, and slow

enough to be caught in such a trap as McNab and the rest would set for you, you weren't the man I wanted."

"You're takin' a lot for granted," snapped Corcoran. "How do you know I'll fall in with you and help you loot the camp and then double-cross your gang? What's to prevent me from blowin' your head off for the trick you played on me? Or spillin' the beans to Hopkins, or to McNab?"

"Half a million in gold!" answered Middleton. "If you do any of those things, you'll miss your chance to share that cache with me."

He shut the door, locked it, pushed the other door to and hung the skins over it. Taking the candle he led the way back into the outer room.

He seated himself at the table and poured whisky from a jug into two glasses.

"Well, what about it?"

Corcoran did not at once reply. His brain was still filled with blinding golden visions. His countenance darkened, became sinister as he meditated, staring into his whisky-glass.

The men of the West lived by their own code. The line between the outlaw and the honest cattleman or *vaquero* was sometimes a hair line, too vague to always be traced with accuracy. Men's personal codes were frequently inconsistent, but rigid as iron. Corcoran would not have stolen one cow, or three cows from a squatter, but he had swept across the border to loot Mexican *rancherios* of hundreds of head. He would not hold up a man and take his money, nor would he murder a man in cold blood; but he felt no compunctions about killing a thief and taking the money the thief had stolen. The gold in that cache was blood-stained, the fruit of crimes to which he would have scorned to stoop. But his code of honesty did not prevent him from looting it from the thieves who had looted it in turn from honest men.

"What's my part in the game?" Corcoran asked abruptly.

Middleton grinned zestfully.

"Good! I thought you'd see it my way. No man could look at that gold and refuse a share of it! They trust me more than they do any other member of the gang. That's why I keep it here. They know – or think they know – that I couldn't slip out with it. But that's where we'll fool them.

"Your job will be just what I told McNab: you'll uphold law and order. I'll tell the boys not to pull any more hold-ups inside the town itself, and that'll give you a reputation. People will think you've got the gang too scared to work in close. You'll enforce laws like those against shooting up saloons, fighting on the street, and the like. And you'll catch the thieves that are still working alone. When you kill one we'll make it appear that he was a Vulture. You've put yourself solid with the people tonight, by killing those fools in the Blackfoot Chief. We'll keep up the deception.

"I don't trust Ace Brent. I believe he's secretly trying to usurp my place as chief of the gang. He's too damned smart. But I don't want you to kill him. He has too many friends in the gang. Even if they didn't suspect I put you up to it, even if it looked like a private quarrel, they'd want your scalp. I'll frame him – get somebody outside the gang to kill him, when the time comes.

"When we get ready to skip, I'll set the vigilantes and the Vultures to battling each other – how, I don't know, but I'll find a way – and we'll sneak while they're at it. Then for California – South America and the sharing of the gold!"

"The sharin' of the gold!" echoed Corcoran, his eyes lit with grim laughter.

Their hard hands met across the rough table, and the same enigmatic smile played on the lips of both men.

V

The Wheel Begins to Turn

Corcoran stalked through the milling crowd that swarmed in the street, and headed toward the Golden Garter Dance Hall and Saloon. A man lurching through the door with the wide swing of hilarious

intoxication stumbled into him and clutched at him to keep from falling to the floor.

Corcoran righted him, smiling faintly into the bearded, rubicund countenance that peered into his.

"Steve Corcoran, by thunder!" whooped the inebriated one gleefully. "Besh damn' deputy in the Territory! 'S a honor to get picked up by Steve Corcoran! Come in and have a drink."

"You've had too many now," returned Corcoran.

"Right!" agreed the other. "I'm goin' home now, 'f I can get there. Lasht time I was a little full, I didn't make it, by a quarter of a mile! I went to sleep in a ditch across from your shack. I'd 'a' come in and slept on the floor, only I was 'fraid you'd shoot me for one of them derned Vultures!"

Men about them laughed. The intoxicated man was Joe Willoughby, a prominent merchant in Wahpeton, and extremely popular for his freehearted and open-handed ways.

"Just knock on the door next time and tell me who it is," grinned Corcoran. "You're welcome to a blanket in the sheriff's office, or a bunk in my room, any time you need it."

"Soul of gener – generoshity!" proclaimed Willoughby boisterously. "Goin' home now before the licker gets down in my legs. S'long, old pard!"

He weaved away down the street, amidst the jovial joshings of the miners, to which he retorted with bibulous good nature.

Corcoran turned again into the dance hall and brushed against another man, at whom he glanced sharply, noting the set jaw, the haggard countenance and the bloodshot eyes. This man, a young miner well known to Corcoran, pushed his way through the crowd and hurried up the street with the manner of a man who goes with a definite purpose. Corcoran hesitated, as though to follow him, then decided against it and entered the dance hall. Half the reason for a gunfighter's continued existence lay in his ability to read and analyze the expressions men wore, to correctly interpret the jut of jaw, the glitter of eye. He knew this young miner was determined on some course of action that might result in violence. But the man

was not a criminal, and Corcoran never interfered in private quarrels so long as they did not threaten the public safety.

A girl was singing, in a clear, melodious voice, to the accompaniment of a jangling, banging piano. As Corcoran seated himself at a table, with his back to the wall and a clear view of the whole hall before him, she concluded her number amid a boisterous clamor of applause. Her face lit as she saw him. Coming lightly across the hall, she sat down at his table. She rested her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands, and fixed her wide clear gaze on his brown face.

"Shot any Vultures today, Steve?"

He made no answer as he lifted the glass of beer brought him by a waiter.

"They must be scared of you," she continued, and something of youthful hero-worship glowed in her eyes. "There hasn't been a murder or hold-up in town for the past month, since you've been here. Of course you can't be everywhere. They still kill men and rob them in the camps up the ravines, but they keep out of town.

"And that time you took the stage through to Yankton! It wasn't your fault that they held it up and got the gold on the other side of Yankton. You weren't in it, then. I wish I'd been there and seen the fight, when you fought off the men who tried to hold you up, half way between here and Yankton."

"There wasn't any fight to it," he said impatiently, restless under praise he knew he did not deserve.

"I know; they were afraid of you. You shot at them and they ran."

Very true; it had been Middleton's idea for Corcoran to take the stage through to the next town east, and beat off a fake attempt at hold-up. Corcoran had never relished the memory; whatever his faults, he had the pride of his profession; a fake gunfight was as repugnant to him as a business hoax to an honest business man.

"Everybody knows that the stage company tried to hire you away from Middleton, as a regular shotgun-guard. But you told them that your business was to protect life and property here in Wahpeton."

She meditated a moment and then laughed reminiscently.

“You know, when you pulled me off of Conchita that night, I thought you were just another blustering bully like McNab. I was beginning to believe that Middleton was taking pay from the Vultures, and that his deputies were crooked. I know things that some people don’t.” Her eyes became shadowed as if by an unpleasant memory in which, though her companion could not know it, was limned the handsome, sinister face of Ace Brent. “Or maybe people do. Maybe they guess things, but are afraid to say anything.

“But I was mistaken about you, and since you’re square, then Middleton must be, too. I guess it was just too big a job for him and his other deputies. None of them could have wiped out that gang in the Blackfoot Chief that night like you did. It wasn’t your fault that Tom Deal got away that night, before he could be questioned. If he hadn’t though, maybe you could have made him tell who the other Vultures were.”

“I met Jack McBride comin’ out of here,” said Corcoran abruptly. “He looked like he was about ready to start gunnin’ for somebody. Did he drink much in here?”

“Not much. I know what’s the matter with him. He’s been gambling too much down at the King of Diamonds. Ace Brent has been winning his money for a week. McBride’s nearly broke, and I believe he thinks Brent is crooked. He came in here, drank some whisky, and let fall a remark about having a show-down with Brent.”

Corcoran rose abruptly. “Reckon I better drift down towards the King of Diamonds. Somethin’ may bust loose there. McBride’s quick with a gun, and high-tempered. Brent’s deadly. Their private business is none of my affair. But if they want to fight it out, they’ll have to get out where innocent people won’t get hit by stray slugs.”

Glory Bland watched him as his tall, erect figure swung out of the door, and there was a glow in her eyes that had never been awakened there by any other man.

Corcoran had almost reached the King of Diamonds gambling hall, when the ordinary noises of the street were split by the crash

of a heavy gun. Simultaneously men came headlong out of the doors, shouting, shoving, plunging in their haste.

"McBride's killed!" bawled a hairy miner.

"No, it's Brent!" yelped another. The crowd surged and milled, craning their necks to see through the windows, yet crowding back from the door in fear of stray bullets. As Corcoran made for the door he heard a man bawl in answer to an eager question: "McBride accused Brent of usin' marked cards, and offered to prove it to the crowd. Brent said he'd kill him and pulled his gun to do it. But it snapped. I heard the hammer click. Then McBride drilled him before he could try again."

Men gave way as Corcoran pushed through the crowd. Somebody yelped: "Look out, Steve! McBride's on the war-path!"

Corcoran stepped into the gambling hall, which was deserted except for the gambler who lay dead on the floor, with a bullet-hole over his heart, and the killer who half-crouched with his back to the bar, and a smoking gun lifted in his hand.

McBride's lips were twisted hard in a snarl, and he looked like a wolf at bay.

"Get back, Corcoran," he warned. "I ain't got nothin' against you, but I ain't goin' to be murdered like a sheep."

"Who said anything about murderin' you?" demanded Corcoran impatiently.

"Oh, I know you wouldn't. But Brent's got friends. They'll never let me get away with killin' him. I believe he was a Vulture. I believe the Vultures will be after me for this. But if they get me, they've got to get me fightin'."

"Nobody's goin' to hurt you," said Corcoran tranquilly. "You better give me your gun and come along. I'll have to arrest you, but it won't amount to nothin', and you ought to know it. As soon as a miners' court can be got together, you'll be tried and acquitted. It was a plain case of self-defense. I reckon no honest folks will do any grievin' for Ace Brent."

"But if I give up my gun and go to jail," objected McBride, wavering, "I'm afraid the toughs will take me out and lynch me."

“I’m givin’ you my word you won’t be harmed while you’re under arrest,” answered Corcoran.

“That’s enough for me,” said McBride promptly, extending his pistol.

Corcoran took it and thrust it into his waist-band. “It’s damned foolishness, takin’ an honest man’s gun,” he grunted. “But accordin’ to Middleton that’s the law. Give me your word that you won’t skip, till you’ve been properly acquitted, and I won’t lock you up.”

“I’d rather go to jail,” said McBride. “I wouldn’t skip. But I’ll be safer in jail, with you guardin’ me, than I would be walkin’ around loose for some of Brent’s friends to shoot me in the back. After I’ve been cleared by due process of law, they won’t dare to lynch me, and I ain’t afraid of ’em when it comes to gun-fightin’, in the open.”

“All right.” Corcoran stooped and picked up the dead gambler’s gun, and thrust it into his belt. The crowd surging about the door gave way as he led his prisoner out.

“There the skunk is!” bawled a rough voice. “He murdered Ace Brent!”

McBride turned pale with anger and glared into the crowd, but Corcoran urged him along, and the miner grinned as other voices rose: “A damned good thing, too!” “Brent was crooked!” “He was a Vulture!” bawled somebody, and for a space a tense silence held. That charge was too sinister to bring openly against even a dead man. Frightened by his own indiscretion the man who had shouted slunk away, hoping none had identified his voice.

“I’ve been gamblin’ too much,” growled McBride, as he strode along beside Corcoran. “Afraid to try to take my gold out, though, and didn’t know what else to do with it. Brent won thousands of dollars’ worth of dust from me; poker, mostly.

“This mornin’ I was talkin’ to Middleton, and he showed a card he said a gambler dropped in his cabin last night. He showed me it was marked, in a way I’d never have suspected. I recognized it as one of the same brand Brent always uses, though Middleton wouldn’t tell me who the gambler was. But later I learned that Brent slept off a drunk in Middleton’s cabin. Damned poor business for a gambler to get drunk.

“I went to the King of Diamonds awhile ago, and started playin’ poker with Brent and a couple of miners. As soon as he raked in the first pot, I called him – flashed the card I got from Middleton and started to show the boys where it was marked. Then Brent pulled his gun; it snapped, and I killed him before he could cock it again. He

knew I had the goods on him. He didn't even give me time to tell where I'd gotten the card."

Corcoran made no reply. He locked McBride in the jail, called the jailer from his near-by shack and told him to furnish the prisoner with food, liquor and anything else he needed, and then hurried to his own cabin. Sitting on his bunk in the room behind the sheriff's office, he ejected the cartridge on which Brent's pistol had snapped. The cap was dented, but had not detonated the powder. Looking closely he saw faint abrasions on both the bullet and brass case. They were such as might have been made by the jaws of iron pinchers and a vise.

Securing a wire-cutter with pincher jaws, he began to work at the bullet. It slipped out with unusual ease, and the contents of the case spilled into his hand. He did not need to use a match to prove that it was not powder. He knew what the stuff was at first glance – iron filings, to give the proper weight to the cartridge from which the powder had been removed.

At that moment he heard someone enter the outer room, and recognized the firm, easy tread of Sheriff Middleton. Corcoran went into the office and Middleton turned, hung his white hat on a nail. "McNab tells me McBride killed Ace Brent!"

"You ought to know!" Corcoran grinned. He tossed the bullet and empty case on the table, dumped the tiny pile of iron dust beside them.

"Brent spent the night with you. You got him drunk, and stole one of his cards to show to McBride. You knew how his cards were marked. You took a cartridge out of Brent's gun and put that one in place. One would be enough. You knew there'd be gunplay between him and McBride, when you showed McBride that marked card, and you wanted to be sure it was Brent who stopped lead."

"That's right," agreed Middleton. "I haven't seen you since early yesterday morning. I was going to tell you about the frame I'd ribbed, as soon as I saw you. I didn't know McBride would go after Brent as quickly as he did.

“Brent got too ambitious. He acted as if he were suspicious of us both, lately. Maybe, though, it was just jealousy as far as you were concerned. He liked Glory Bland, and she could never see him. It gouged him to see her falling for you.

“And he wanted my place as leader of the Vultures. If there was one man in the gang that could have kept us from skipping with the loot, it was Ace Brent.

“But I think I’ve worked it neatly. No one can accuse me of having him murdered, because McBride isn’t in the gang. I have no control over him. But Brent’s friends will want revenge.”

“A miners’ court will acquit McBride on the first ballot.”

“That’s true. Maybe we’d better let him get shot, trying to escape!”

“We will like hell!” rapped Corcoran. “I swore he wouldn’t be harmed while he was under arrest. His part of the deal was on the level. He didn’t know Brent had a blank in his gun, any more than Brent did. If Brent’s friends want his scalp, let ’em go after McBride, like white men ought to, when he’s in a position to defend himself.”

“But after he’s acquitted,” argued Middleton, “they won’t dare gang up on him in the street, and he’ll be too sharp to give them a chance at him in the hills.”

“What the hell do I care?” snarled Corcoran. “What difference does it make to me whether Brent’s friends get even or not? Far as I’m concerned, he got what was comin’ to him. If they ain’t got the guts to give McBride an even break, I sure ain’t goin’ to fix it so they can murder him without riskin’ their own hides. If I catch ’em sneakin’ around the jail for a shot at him, I’ll fill ’em full of hot lead.

“If I’d thought the miners would be crazy enough to do anything to him for killin’ Brent, I’d never arrested him. They won’t. They’ll acquit him. Until they do, I’m responsible for him, and I’ve give my word. And anybody that tries to lynch him while he’s in my charge better be damned sure they’re quicker with a gun than I am.”

“There’s nobody of that nature in Wahpeton,” admitted Middleton with a wry smile. “All right, if you feel your personal honor is involved. But I’ll have to find a way to placate Brent’s friends, or

they'll be accusing me of being indifferent about what happened to him."

VI
Vultures' Court

Next morning Corcoran was awakened by a wild shouting in the street. He had slept in the jail that night, not trusting Brent's friends, but there had been no attempt at violence. He jerked on his boots, and went out into the street, followed by McBride, to learn what the shouting was about.

Men milled about in the street, even at that early hour – for the sun was not yet up – surging about a man in the garb of a miner. This man was astride a horse whose coat was dark with sweat; the man was wild-eyed, bare-headed, and he held his hat in his hands, holding it down for the shouting, cursing throng to see.

"Look at 'em!" he yelled. "Nuggets as big as hen eggs! I took 'em out in an hour, with a pick, diggin' in the wet sand by the creek! And there's plenty more! It's the richest strike these hills ever seen!"

"Where?" roared a hundred voices.

"Well, I got my claim staked out, all I need," said the man, "so I don't mind tellin' you. It ain't twenty miles from here, in a little canyon everybody's overlooked and passed over – Jackrabbit Gorge! The creek's buttered with dust, and the banks are crammed with pockets of nuggets!"

An exuberant whoop greeted this information, and the crowd broke up suddenly as men raced for their shacks.

"New strike," sighed McBride enviously. "The whole town will be surgin' down Jackrabbit Gorge. Wish I could go."

"Gimme your word you'll come back and stand trial, and you can go," promptly offered Corcoran. McBride stubbornly shook his head.

"No, not till I've been cleared legally. Anyway, only a handful of men will get anything. The rest will be pullin' back in to their claims in Wahpeton Gulch tomorrow. Hell, I've been in plenty of them rushes. Only a few ever get anything."

Colonel Hopkins and his partner Dick Bisley hurried past. Hopkins shouted: “We’ll have to postpone your trial until this rush is over, Jack! We were going to hold it today, but in an hour there won’t be enough men in Wahpeton to impanel a jury! Sorry you can’t make the rush. If we can, Dick and I will stake out a claim for you!”

“Thanks, Colonel!”

“No thanks! The camp owes you something for ridding it of that scoundrel Brent. Corcoran, we’ll do the same for you, if you like.”

“No, thanks,” drawled Corcoran. “Minin’s too hard work. I’ve got a gold mine right here in Wahpeton that don’t take so much labor!”

The men burst into laughter at this conceit, and Bisley shouted back as they hurried on: “That’s right! Your salary looks like an assay from the Comstock lode! But you earn it, all right!”

Joe Willoughby came rolling by, leading a seedy-looking burro on which illy-hung pick and shovel banged against skillet and kettle. Willoughby grasped a jug in one hand, and that he had already been sampling it was proved by his wide-legged gait.

“H’ray for the new diggin’s!” he whooped, brandishing the jug at Corcoran and McBride. “Git along, jackass! I’ll be scoopin’ out nuggets bigger’n this jug before night – if the licker don’t git in my legs before I git there!”

“And if it does, he’ll fall into a ravine and wake up in the mornin’ with a fifty pound nugget in each hand,” said McBride. “He’s the luckiest son of a gun in the camp; and the best natured.”

“I’m goin’ and get some ham-and-eggs,” said Corcoran. “You want to come and eat with me, or let Pete Daley fix your breakfast here?”

“I’ll eat in the jail,” decided McBride. “I want to stay in jail till I’m acquitted. Then nobody can accuse me of tryin’ to beat the law in any way.”

“All right.” With a shout to the jailer, Corcoran swung across the road and headed for the camp’s most pretentious restaurant, whose proprietor was growing rich, in spite of the terrific prices he had to pay for vegetables and food of all kinds – prices he passed on to his customers.

While Corcoran was eating, Middleton entered hurriedly, and bending over him, with a hand on his shoulder, spoke softly in his

ear.

"I've just got wind that that old miner, Joe Brockman, is trying to sneak his gold out on a pack mule, under the pretense of making this rush. I don't know whether it's so or not, but some of the boys up in the hills think it is, and are planning to waylay him and kill him. If he intends getting away, he'll leave the trail to Jackrabbit Gorge a few miles out of town, and swing back toward Yankton, taking the trail over Grizzly Ridge – you know where the thickets are so close. The boys will be laying for him either on the ridge or just beyond.

"He hasn't enough dust to make it worth our while to take it. If they hold him up they'll have to kill him, and we want as few murders as possible. Vigilante sentiment is growing, in spite of the people's trust in you and me. Get on your horse and ride to Grizzly Ridge and see that the old man gets away safe. Tell the boys Middleton said to lay off. If they won't listen – but they will. They wouldn't buck you, even without my word to back you. I'll follow the old man, and try to catch up with him before he leaves the Jackrabbit Gorge road.

"I've sent McNab up to watch the jail, just as a formality. I know McBride won't try to escape, but we mustn't be accused of carelessness."

"Let McNab be mighty careful with his shootin' irons," warned Corcoran. "No 'shot while attemptin' to escape', Middleton. I don't trust McNab. If he lays a hand on McBride, I'll kill him as sure as I'm sittin' here."

"Don't worry. McNab hated Brent. Better get going. Take the short cut through the hills to Grizzly Ridge."

"Sure." Corcoran rose and hurried out in the street which was all but deserted. Far down toward the other end of the gulch rose the dust of the rearguard of the army which was surging toward the new strike. Wahpeton looked almost like a deserted town in the early morning light, foreshadowing its ultimate destiny.

Corcoran went to the corral beside the sheriff's cabin and saddled a fast horse, glancing cryptically at the powerful pack mules whose numbers were steadily increasing. He smiled grimly as he remembered Middleton telling Colonel Hopkins that pack mules were a good investment. As he led his horse out of the corral his gaze fell on a man sprawling under the trees across the road, lazily whittling. Day and night, in one way or another, the gang kept an eye on the cabin which hid the cache of their gold. Corcoran doubted if they actually suspected Middleton's intentions. But they wanted to be sure that no stranger did any snooping about.

Corcoran rode into a ravine that straggled away from the gulch, and a few minutes later he followed a narrow path to its rim, and headed through the mountains toward the spot, miles away, where a trail crossed Grizzly Ridge, a long, steep backbone, thickly timbered.

He had not left the ravine far behind him when a quick rattle of hoofs brought him around, in time to see a horse slide recklessly down a low bluff amid a shower of shale. He swore at the sight of its rider.

"Glory! What the hell?"

"Steve!" She reined up breathlessly beside him. "Go back! It's a trick! I heard Buck Gorman talking to Conchita; he's sweet on her. He's a friend of Brent's – a Vulture! She twists all his secrets out of him. Her room is next to mine, she thought I was out. I overheard them talking. Gorman said a trick had been played on you to get you out of town. He didn't say how. Said you'd go to Grizzly Ridge on a wild-goose chase. While you're gone they're going to assemble a 'miners' court,' out of the riff-raff left in town. They're going to appoint a 'judge' and 'jury,' take McBride out of jail, try him for killing Ace Brent – and hang him!"

A lurid oath ripped through Steve Corcoran's lips, and for an instant the tiger flashed into view, eyes blazing, fangs bared. Then his dark face was an inscrutable mask again. He wrenched his horse around.

"Much obliged, Glory. I'll be dustin' back into town. You circle around and come in another way. I don't want folks to know you

told me."

"Neither do I!" she shuddered. "I knew Ace Brent was a Vulture. He boasted of it to me, once when he was drunk. But I never dared tell anyone. He told me what he'd do to me if I did. I'm glad he's dead. I didn't know Gorman was a Vulture, but I might have guessed it. He was Brent's closest friend. If they ever find out I told you –"

"They won't," Corcoran assured her. It was natural for a girl to fear such black-hearted rogues as the Vultures, but the thought of them actually harming her never entered his mind. He came from a country where not even the worst of scoundrels would ever dream of hurting a woman.

He drove his horse at a reckless gallop back the way he had come, but not all the way. Before he reached the Gulch he swung wide of the ravine he had followed out, and plunged into another, that would bring him into the Gulch at the end of town where the jail stood. As he rode down it he heard a deep, awesome roar he recognized – the roar of the man-pack, hunting its own kind.

A band of men surged up the dusty street, roaring, cursing. One man waved a rope. Pale faces of bartenders, store-clerks and dance hall girls peered timidly out of doorways as the unsavory mob roared past. Corcoran knew them, by sight or reputation: plug-uglies, barroom loafers, skulkers – many were Vultures, as he knew; others were riff-raff, ready for any sort of deviltry that required neither courage nor intelligence – the scum that gathers in any mining camp.

Dismounting, Corcoran glided through the straggling trees that grew behind the jail, and heard McNab challenge the mob.

"What do you want?"

"We aim to try your prisoner!" shouted the leader. "We come in the due process of law. We've app'inted a jedge and panelled a jury, and we demands that you hand over the prisoner to be tried in miners' court, accordin' to legal precedent!"

"How do I know you're representative of the camp?" parried McNab.

" 'Cause we're the only body of men in camp right now!" yelled someone, and this was greeted by a roar of laughter.

"We come empowered with the proper authority –" began the leader, and broke off suddenly: "Grab him, boys!"

There was the sound of a brief scuffle, McNab swore vigorously, and the leader's voice rose triumphantly: "Let go of him, boys, but don't give him his gun. McNab, you ought to know better'n to try to oppose legal procedure, and you a upholder of law and order!"

Again a roar of sardonic laughter, and McNab growled: "All right; go ahead with the trial. But you do it over my protests. I don't believe this is a representative assembly."

"Yes, it is," averred the leader, and then his voice thickened with blood-lust. "Now, Daley, gimme that key and bring out the prisoner."

The mob surged toward the door of the jail, and at that instant Corcoran stepped around the corner of the cabin and leaped up on the low porch it boasted. There was a hissing intake of breath. Men halted suddenly, digging their heels against the pressure behind them. The surging line wavered backward, leaving two figures isolated – McNab, scowling, disarmed, and a hairy giant whose huge belly was girt with a broad belt bristling with gun butts and knife hilts. He held a noose in one hand, and his bearded lips gaped as he glared at the unexpected apparition.

For a breathless instant Corcoran did not speak. He did not look at McBride's pallid countenance peering through the barred door behind him. He stood facing the mob, his head slightly bent, a somber, immobile figure, sinister with menace.

“Well,” he said finally, softly, “what’s holdin’ up the baile?”

The leader blustered feebly.

“We come here to try a murderer!”

Corcoran lifted his head and the man involuntarily recoiled at the lethal glitter of his eyes.

“Who’s your judge?” the Texan inquired softly.

“We appointed Jake Bissett, there,” spoke up a man, pointing at the uncomfortable giant on the porch.

“So you’re goin’ to hold a miners’ court,” murmured Corcoran. “With a judge and jury picked out of the dives and honky-tonks – scum and dirt of the gutter!” And suddenly uncontrollable fury flamed in his eyes. Bissett, sensing his intention, bellowed in ox-like alarm and grabbed frantically at a gun. His fingers had scarcely touched the checkered butt when smoke and flame roared from Corcoran’s right hip. Bissett pitched backward off the porch as if he had been struck by a hammer; the rope tangled about his limbs as he fell, and he lay in the dust that slowly turned crimson, his hairy fingers twitching spasmodically.

Corcoran faced the mob, livid under his sun-burnt bronze. His eyes were coals of blue hell’s-fire. There was a gun in each hand, and from the right-hand muzzle a wisp of blue smoke drifted lazily upward.

“I declare this court adjourned!” he roared. “The judge is done impeached, and the jury’s discharged! I’ll give you thirty seconds to clear the court-room!”

He was one man against nearly a hundred, but he was a grey wolf facing a pack of yapping jackals. Each man knew that if the mob surged on him, they would drag him down at last; but each man knew what an awful toll would first be paid, and each man feared that he himself would be one of those to pay that toll.

They hesitated, stumbled back – gave way suddenly and scattered in all directions. Some backed away, some shamelessly turned their backs and fled. With a snarl Corcoran thrust his guns back in their

scabbards and turned toward the door where McBride stood, grasping the bars.

"I thought I was a goner that time, Corcoran," he gasped. The Texan pulled the door open, and pushed McBride's pistol into his hand.

"There's a horse tied behind the jail," said Corcoran. "Get on it and dust out of here. I'll take the full responsibility. If you stay here they'll burn down the jail, or shoot you through the window. You can make it out of town while they're scattered. I'll explain to Middleton and Hopkins. In a month or so, if you want to, come back and stand trial, as a matter of formality. Things will be cleaned up around here by then."

McBride needed no urging. The grisly fate he had just escaped had shaken his nerve. Shaking Corcoran's hand passionately, he ran stumblingly through the trees to the horse Corcoran had left there. A few moments later he was fogging it out of the Gulch.

McNab came up, scowling and grumbling.

"You had no authority to let him go. I tried to stop the mob –"

Corcoran wheeled and faced him, making no attempt to conceal his hatred.

"You did like hell! Don't pull that stuff with me, McNab. You was in on this, and so was Middleton. You put up a bluff of talk, so afterwards you could tell Colonel Hopkins and the others that you tried to stop the lynchin' and was overpowered. I saw the scrap you put up when they grabbed you! Hell! You're a rotten actor."

"You can't talk to me like that!" roared McNab.

The old tigerish light flickered in the blue eyes. Corcoran did not exactly move, yet he seemed to sink into a half crouch, as a cougar does for the killing spring.

"If you don't like my style, McNab," he said softly, thickly, "you're more'n welcome to open the *baile* whenever you get ready!"

For an instant they faced each other, McNab black-browed and scowling, Corcoran's thin lips almost smiling, but blue fire lighting his eyes. Then with a grunt McNab turned and slouched away, his shaggy head swaying from side to side like that of a surly bull.

VII
A Vulture's Wings Are Clipped

Middleton pulled up his horse suddenly as Corcoran reined out of the bushes. One glance showed the sheriff that Corcoran's mood was far from placid. They were amidst a grove of alders, perhaps a mile from the Gulch.

"Why, hello, Corcoran," began Middleton, concealing his surprise. "I caught up with Brockman. It was just a wild rumor. He didn't have any gold. That –"

"Drop it!" snapped Corcoran. "I know why you sent me off on that wild-goose chase – same reason you pulled out of town. To give Brent's friends a chance to get even with McBride. If I hadn't turned around and dusted back into Wahpeton, McBride would be kickin' his life out at the end of a rope, right now."

"You came back –?"

"Yeah! And now Jake Bissett's in hell instead of Jack McBride, and McBride's dusted out – on a horse I gave him. I told you I gave him my word he wouldn't be lynched."

"You killed Bissett?"

"Deader'n hell!"

"He was a Vulture," muttered Middleton, but he did not seem displeased. "Brent, Bissett – the more Vultures die, the easier it will be for us to get away when we go. That's one reason I had Brent killed. But you should have let them hang McBride. Of course I framed this affair; I had to do something to satisfy Brent's friends. Otherwise they might have gotten suspicious.

"If they suspicioned I had anything to do with having him killed, or thought I wasn't anxious to punish the man who killed him, they'd make trouble for me. I can't have a split in the gang now. And even I can't protect you from Brent's friends, after this."

"Have I ever asked you, or any man, for protection?" The quick jealous pride of the gunfighter vibrated in his voice.

"Breckman, Red Bill, Curly, and now Bissett. You've killed too many Vultures. I made them think the killing of the first three was a mistake, all around. Bissett wasn't very popular. But they won't

forgive you for stopping them from hanging the man who killed Ace Brent. They won't attack you openly, of course. But you'll have to watch every step you make. They'll kill you if they can, and I won't be able to prevent them."

"If I'd tell 'em just how Ace Brent died, you'd be in the same boat," said Corcoran bitingly. "Of course, I won't. Our final getaway depends on you keepin' their confidence – as well as the confidence of the honest folks. This last killin' ought to put me, and therefore you, ace-high with Hopkins and his crowd."

"They're still talking vigilante. I encourage it. It's coming anyway. Murders in the outlying camps are driving men to a frenzy of fear and rage, even though such crimes have ceased in Wahpeton. Better to fall in line with the inevitable and twist it to a man's own ends, than to try to oppose it. If you can keep Brent's friends from killing you for a few more weeks, we'll be ready to jump. Look out for Buck Gorman. He's the most dangerous man in the gang. He was Brent's friend, and he has his own friends – all dangerous men. Don't kill him unless you have to."

"I'll take care of myself," answered Corcoran somberly. "I looked for Gorman in the mob, but he wasn't there. Too smart. But he's the man behind the mob. Bissett was just a stupid ox; Gorman planned it – or rather, I reckon he helped you plan it."

"I'm wondering how you found out about it," said Middleton. "You wouldn't have come back unless somebody told you. Who was it?"

"None of your business," growled Corcoran. It did not occur to him that Glory Bland would be in any danger from Middleton, even if the sheriff knew about her part in the affair, but he did not relish being questioned, and did not feel obliged to answer anybody's queries.

"That new gold strike sure came in mighty handy for you and Gorman," he said. "Did you frame that, too?"

Middleton nodded.

"Of course. That was one of my men who poses as a miner. He had a hatful of nuggets from the cache. He served his purpose and joined the men who hide up there in the hills. The mob of miners

will be back tomorrow, tired and mad and disgusted, and when they hear about what happened, they'll recognize the handiwork of the Vultures; at least some of them will. But they won't connect me with it in any way. Now we'll ride back to town. Things are breaking our way, in spite of your foolish interference with the mob. But let Gorman alone. You can't afford to make any more enemies in the gang."

Buck Gorman leaned on the bar in the Golden Eagle and expressed his opinion of Steve Corcoran in no uncertain terms. The crowd listened sympathetically, for, almost to a man, they were the ruffians and riff-raff of the camp.

"The dog pretends to be a deputy!" roared Gorman, whose blood-shot eyes and damp tangled hair attested to the amount of liquor he had drunk. "But he kills an appointed judge, breaks up a court and drives away the jury – yes, and releases the prisoner, a man charged with murder!"

It was the day after the fake gold strike, and the disillusioned miners were drowning their chagrin in the saloons. But few honest miners were in the Golden Eagle.

"Colonel Hopkins and other prominent citizens held an investigation," said some one. "They declared that evidence showed Corcoran to have been justified – denounced the court as a mob, acquitted Corcoran of killing Bissett, and then went ahead and acquitted McBride for killing Brent, even though he wasn't there."

Gorman snarled like a cat, and reached for his whisky glass. His hand did not twitch or quiver, his movements were more catlike than ever. The whisky had inflamed his mind, illumined his brain with a white-hot certainty that was akin to insanity, but it had not affected his nerves or any part of his muscular system. He was more deadly drunk than sober.

"I was Brent's best friend!" he roared. "I was Bissett's friend."

"They say Bissett was a Vulture," whispered a voice. Gorman lifted his tawny head and glared about the room as a lion might glare.

“Who says he was a Vulture? Why don’t these slanderers accuse a living man? It’s always a dead man they accuse! Well, what if he was? He was my friend! Maybe that makes *me* a Vulture!”

No one laughed or spoke as his flaming gaze swept the room, but each man, as those blazing eyes rested on him in turn, felt the chill breath of Death blowing upon him.

“Bissett a Vulture!” he said, wild enough with drink and fury to commit any folly, as well as any atrocity. He did not heed the eyes fixed on him, some in fear, a few in intense interest. “Who knows who the Vultures are? Who knows who, or what anybody really is? Who really knows anything about this man Corcoran, for instance? I could tell –”

A light step on the threshold brought him about as Corcoran loomed in the door. Gorman froze, snarling, lips writhed back, a tawny-maned incarnation of hate and menace.

“I heard you was makin’ a talk about me down here, Gorman,” said Corcoran. His face was bleak and emotionless as that of a stone image, but his eyes burned with murderous purpose.

Gorman snarled wordlessly.

“I looked for you in the mob,” said Corcoran, tonelessly, his voice as soft and without emphasis as the even strokes of a feather. It seemed almost as if his voice were a thing apart from him; his lips murmuring while all the rest of his being was tense with concentration on the man before him.

“You wasn’t there. You sent your coyotes, but you didn’t have the guts to come yourself, and –”

The dart of Gorman’s hand to his gun was like the blurring stroke of a snake’s head, but no eye could follow Corcoran’s hand. His gun smashed before anyone knew he had reached for it. Like an echo came the roar of Gorman’s shot. But the bullet ploughed splinteringly into the floor, from a hand that was already death-stricken and falling. Gorman pitched over and lay still, the swinging lamp glinting on his upturned spurs and the blue steel of the smoking gun which lay by his hand.

VIII

The Coming of the Vigilantes

Colonel Hopkins looked absently at the liquor in his glass, stirred restlessly, and said abruptly: “Middleton, I might as well come to the point. My friends and I have organized a vigilante committee, just as we should have done months ago. Now, wait a minute. Don’t take this as a criticism of your methods. You’ve done wonders in the last month, ever since you brought Steve Corcoran in here. Not a hold-up in the town, not a killing – that is, not a murder, and only a few shootings among the honest citizens.

“Added to that the ridding of the camp of such scoundrels as Jake Bissett and Buck Gorman. They were both undoubtedly members of the Vultures. I wish Corcoran hadn’t killed Gorman just when he did, though. The man was drunk, and about to make some reckless disclosures about the gang. At least that’s what a friend of mine thinks, who was in the Golden Eagle that night. But anyway it couldn’t be helped.

“No, we’re not criticizing you at all. But obviously you can’t stop the murders and robberies that are going on up and down the Gulch, all the time. And you can’t stop the outlaws from holding up the stage regularly.

“So that’s where we come in. We have sifted the camp, carefully, over a period of months, until we have fifty men we can trust absolutely. It’s taken a long time, because we’ve had to be sure of our men. We didn’t want to take in a man who might be a spy for the Vultures. But at last we know where we stand. We’re not sure just who *is* a Vulture, but we know who *isn’t*, in as far as our organization is concerned.

“We can work together, John. We have no intention of interfering within your jurisdiction, or trying to take the law out of your hands. We demand a free hand outside the camp; inside the limits of Wahpeton we are willing to act under your orders, or at least according to your advice. Of course we will work in absolute secrecy until we have proof enough to strike.”

“You must remember, Colonel,” reminded Middleton, “that all along I’ve admitted the impossibility of my breaking up the Vultures with the limited means at my disposal. I’ve never opposed a vigilante committee. All I’ve demanded was that when it was formed, it should be composed of honest men, and be free of any element which might seek to twist its purpose into the wrong channels.”

“That’s true. I didn’t expect any opposition from you, and I can assure you that we’ll always work hand-in-hand with you and your deputies.” He hesitated, as if over something unpleasant, and then said: “John, are you sure of *all* your deputies?”

Middleton’s head jerked up and he shot a startled glance at the Colonel, as if the latter had surprised him by putting into words a thought that had already occurred to him.

“Why do you ask?” he parried.

“Well,” Hopkins was embarrassed. “I don’t know – maybe I’m prejudiced – but – well, damn it, to put it bluntly, I’ve sometimes wondered about Bill McNab!”

Middleton filled the glasses again before he answered.

“Colonel, I never accuse a man without iron-clad evidence. I’m not always satisfied with McNab’s actions, but it may merely be the man’s nature. He’s a surly brute. But he has his virtues. I’ll tell you frankly, the reason I haven’t discharged him is that I’m not sure of him. That probably sounds ambiguous.”

“Not at all. I appreciate your position. You have as much as said you suspect him of double-dealing, and are keeping him on your force so you can watch him. Your wits are not dull, John. Frankly – and this will probably surprise you – until a month ago some of the men were beginning to whisper some queer things about you – queer suspicions, that is. But your bringing Corcoran in showed us that you were on the level. You’d have never brought him in if you’d been taking pay from the Vultures!”

Middleton halted with his glass at his lips.

“Great heavens!” he ejaculated. “Did they suspect me of *that?”*

“Just a fool idea some of the men had,” Hopkins assured him. “Of course I never gave it a thought. The men who thought it are

ashamed now. The killing of Bissett, of Gorman, of the men in the Blackfoot Chief, show that Corcoran's on the level. And of course, he's merely taking his orders from you. All those men were Vultures, of course. It's a pity Tom Deal got away before we could question him." He rose to go.

"McNab was guarding Deal," said Middleton, and his tone implied more than his words said.

Hopkins shot him a startled glance.

"By heaven, so he was! But he was really wounded – I saw the bullet hole in his arm, where Deal shot him in making his getaway."

"That's true." Middleton rose and reached for his hat. "I'll walk along with you. I want to find Corcoran and tell him what you've just told me."

"It's been a week since he killed Gorman," mused Hopkins. "I've been expecting Gorman's Vulture friends to try to get him, any time."

"So have I!" answered Middleton, with a grimness which his companion missed.

IX

The Vultures Swoop

Down the gulch lights blazed; the windows of cabins were yellow squares in the night, and beyond them the velvet sky reflected the lurid heart of the camp. The intermittent breeze brought faint strains of music and the other noises of hilarity. But up the gulch, where a clump of trees straggled near an unlighted cabin, the darkness of the moonless night was a mask that the faint stars did not illuminate.

Figures moved in the deep shadows of the trees, voices whispered, their furtive tones mingling with the rustling of the wind through the leaves.

"We ain't close enough. We ought to lay alongside his cabin and blast him as he goes in."

A second voice joined the first, muttering like a bodyless voice in a conclave of ghosts.

“We’ve gone all over that. I tell you this is the best way. Get him off guard. You’re sure Middleton was playin’ cards at the King of Diamonds?”

Another voice answered: “He’ll be there till daylight, likely.”

“He’ll be awful mad,” whispered the first speaker.

“Let him. He can’t afford to do anything about it. *Listen!* Somebody’s comin’ up the road!”

They crouched down in the bushes, merging with the blacker shadows. They were so far from the cabin, and it was so dark, that the approaching figure was only a dim blur in the gloom.

“It’s him!” a voice hissed fiercely, as the blur merged with the bulkier shadow that was the cabin.

In the stillness a door rasped across a sill. A yellow light sprang up, streaming through the door, blocking out a small window high up in the wall. The man inside did not cross the lighted doorway, and the window was too high to see through into the cabin.

The light went out after a few minutes.

“Come on!” The three men rose and went stealthily toward the cabin. Their bare feet made no sound, for they had discarded their boots. Coats too had been discarded, any garment that might swing loosely and rustle, or catch on projections. Cocked guns were in their hands, they could have been no more wary had they been approaching the lair of a lion. And each man’s heart pounded suffocatingly, for the prey they stalked was far more dangerous than any lion.

When one spoke it was so low that his companions hardly heard him with their ears a matter of inches from his bearded lips.

“We’ll take our places like we planned, Joel. You’ll go to the door and call him, like we told you. He knows Middleton trusts you. He don’t know you’d be helpin’ Gorman’s friends. He’ll recognize your voice, and he won’t suspect nothin’. When he comes to the door and opens it, step back into the shadows and fall flat. We’ll do the rest from where we’ll be layin’.”

His voice shook slightly as he spoke, and the other man shuddered; his face was a pallid oval in the darkness.

“I’ll do it, but I bet he kills some of us. I bet he kills me, anyway. I must have been crazy when I said I’d help you fellows.”

“You can’t back out now!” hissed the other. They stole forward, their guns advanced, their hearts in their mouths. Then the foremost man caught at the arms of his companions.

“Wait! Look there! He’s left the door open!”

The open doorway was a blacker shadow in the shadow of the wall.

“He knows we’re after him!” There was a catch of hysteria in the babbling whisper. “It’s a trap!”

“Don’t be a fool! How could he know? He’s asleep. I hear him snorin’. We won’t wake him. We’ll step into the cabin and let him have it! We’ll have enough light from the window to locate the bunk, and we’ll rake it with lead before he can move. He’ll wake up in hell. Come on, and for God’s sake, don’t make no noise!”

The last advice was unnecessary. Each man, as he set his bare foot down, felt as if he were setting it into the lair of a diamond-backed rattler.

As they glided, one after another, across the threshold, they made less noise than the wind blowing through the black branches. They crouched by the door, straining their eyes across the room, whence came the rhythmic snoring. Enough light sifted through the small window to show them a vague outline that was a bunk, with a shapeless mass upon it.

A man caught his breath in a short, uncontrollable gasp. Then the cabin was shaken by a thunderous volley, three guns roaring together. Lead swept the bunk in a devastating storm, thudding into flesh and bone, smacking into wood. A wild cry broke in a gagging gasp. Limbs thrashed wildly and a heavy body tumbled to the floor. From the darkness on the floor beside the bunk welled up hideous sounds, choking gurgles and a convulsive flopping and thumping. The men crouching near the door poured lead blindly at the sounds. There was fear and panic in the haste and number of their shots. They did not cease jerking their triggers until their guns were empty, and the noises on the floor had ceased. “Out of here, quick!” gasped one.

“No! Here’s the table, and a candle on it. I felt it in the dark. I’ve got to know that he’s dead before I leave this cabin. I’ve got to see him lyin’ dead if I’m goin’ to sleep easy. We’ve got plenty of time to get away. Folks down the gulch must have heard the shots, but it’ll take time for them to get here. No danger. I’m goin’ to light the candle –”

There was a rasping sound, and a yellow light sprang up, etching three staring, bearded faces. Wisps of blue smoke blurred the light as the candle-wick ignited from the fumbling match, but the men saw a huddled shape crumpled near the bunk, from which streams of dark crimson radiated in every direction.

“*Ahhh!*”

They whirled at the sound of running footsteps.

“Oh, God!” shrieked one of the men, falling to his knees, his hands lifted to shut out a terrible sight. The other ruffians staggered with the shock of what they saw. They stood gaping, livid, helpless, empty guns sagging in their hands.

For in the doorway, glaring in dangerous amazement, with a gun in each hand, stood the man whose lifeless body they thought lay over there by the splintered bunk!

"Drop them guns!" Corcoran rasped. They clattered on the floor as the hands of their owners mechanically reached skyward. The man on the floor staggered up, his hands empty; he retched, shaken by the nausea of fear.

"Joel Miller!" said Corcoran evenly; his surprise was passed, as he realized what had happened. "Didn't know you run with Gorman's crowd. Reckon Middleton'll be some surprised, too."

"You're a devil!" gasped Miller. "You can't be killed! We killed you – heard you roll off your bunk and die on the floor, in the dark. We kept shooting after we knew you were dead. But you're alive!"

"You didn't shoot me," grunted Corcoran. "You shot a man you thought was me. I was comin' up the road when I heard the shots. You killed Joe Willoughby! He was drunk and I reckon he staggered in here and fell in my bunk, like he's done before."

The men went whiter yet under their bushy beards, with rage and chagrin and fear.

"Willoughby!" babbled Miller. "The camp will never stand for this! Let us go, Corcoran! Hopkins and his crowd will hang us! It'll mean the end of the Vultures! Your end, too, Corcoran! If they hang us, we'll talk first! They'll find out that you're one of us!"

"In that case," muttered Corcoran, his eyes narrowing, "I'd better kill the three of you. That's the sensible solution. You killed Willoughby, tryin' to get me; I kill you, in self-defense."

"Don't do it, Corcoran!" screamed Miller, frantic with terror.

"Shut up, you dog," growled one of the other men, glaring balefully at their captor. "Corcoran wouldn't shoot down unarmed men."

"No, I wouldn't," said Corcoran. "Not unless you made some kind of a break. I'm peculiar that way, which I see is a handicap in this country. But it's the way I was raised, and I can't get over it. No, I ain't goin' to beef you cold, though you've just tried to get me that way.

“But I’ll be damned if I’m goin’ to let you sneak off, to come back here and try it again the minute you get your nerve bucked up. I’d about as soon be hanged by the vigilantes as shot in the back by a passle of rats like you-all. Vultures, hell! You ain’t even got the guts to be good buzzards.

“I’m goin’ to take you down the gulch and throw you in jail. It’ll be up to Middleton to decide what to do with you. He’ll probably work out some scheme that’ll swindle everybody except himself; but I warn you – one yap about the Vultures to anybody, and I’ll forget my raisin’ and send you to hell with your belts empty and your boots on.”

———

The noise in the King of Diamonds was hushed suddenly as a man rushed in and bawled: “The Vultures have murdered Joe Willoughby! Steve Corcoran caught three of ’em, and has just locked ’em up! This time we’ve got some live Vultures to work on!”

A roar answered him and the gambling hall emptied itself as men rushed yelling into the street. John Middleton laid down his hand of cards, donned his white hat with a hand that was steady as a rock, and strode after them.

Already a crowd was surging and roaring around the jail. The miners were lashed into a murderous frenzy and were restrained from shattering the door and dragging forth the cowering prisoners only by the presence of Corcoran, who faced them on the jail-porch. McNab, Richardson and Stark were there, also. McNab was pale under his whiskers, and Stark seemed nervous and ill at ease, but Richardson, as always, was cold as ice.

“Hang ’em!” roared the mob. “Let us have ’em, Steve! You’ve done your part! This camp’s put up with enough! Let us have ’em!”

Middleton climbed up on the porch, and was greeted by loud cheers, but his efforts to quiet the throng proved futile. Somebody brandished a rope with a noose in it. Resentment, long smoldering, was bursting into flame, fanned by hysterical fear and hate. The

mob had no wish to harm either Corcoran or Middleton – did not intend to harm them. But they were determined to drag out the prisoners and string them up.

Colonel Hopkins forced his way through the crowd, mounted the step, and waved his hands until he obtained a certain amount of silence.

"Listen, men!" he roared. "This is the beginning of a new era for Wahpeton! This camp has been terrorized long enough. We're beginning a rule of law and order, right now! But don't spoil it at the very beginning! These men shall hang – I swear it! But let's do it legally, and with the sanction of law. Another thing: if you hang them out of hand, we'll never learn who their companions and leaders are.

"Tomorrow, I promise you, a court of inquiry will sit on their case. They'll be questioned and forced to reveal the men above and behind them. This camp is going to be cleaned up! Let's clean it up lawfully and in order!"

"Colonel's right!" bawled a bearded giant. "Ain't no use to hang the little rats till we find out who's the big 'uns!"

A roar of approbation rose as the temper of the mob changed. It began to break up, as the men scattered to hasten back to the bars and indulge in their passion to discuss the new development.

Hopkins shook Corcoran's hand heartily.

"Congratulations, sir! I've seen poor Joe's body. A terrible sight. The fiends fairly shot the poor fellow to ribbons. Middleton, I told you the vigilantes wouldn't usurp your authority in Wahpeton. I keep my word. We'll leave these murderers in your jail, guarded by your deputies. Tomorrow the vigilante court will sit in session, and I hope we'll come to the bottom of this filthy mess."

And so saying he strode off, followed by a dozen or so steely-eyed men whom Middleton knew formed the nucleus of the Colonel's organization.

When they were out of hearing, Middleton stepped to the door and spoke quickly to the prisoners: "Keep your mouths shut. You fools have gotten us all in a jam, but I'll snake you out of it, somehow." To McNab he spoke: "Watch the jail. Don't let anybody

come near it. Corcoran and I have got to talk this over." Lowering his voice so the prisoners could not hear, he added: "If anybody does come, that you can't order off, and these fools start shooting off their heads, close their mouths with lead."

Corcoran followed Middleton into the shadow of the gulch-wall. Out of earshot of the nearest cabin, Middleton turned. "Just what happened?"

"Gorman's friends tried to get me. They killed Joe Willoughby by mistake. I hauled them in. That's all."

"That's not all," muttered Middleton. "There'll be hell to pay if they come to trial. Miller's yellow. He'll talk, sure. I've been afraid Gorman's friends would try to kill you – wondering how it would work out. It's worked out just about the worst way it possibly could. You should either have killed them or let them go. Yet I appreciate your attitude. You have scruples against cold-blooded murder; and if you'd turned them loose, they'd have been back potting at you the next night."

"I couldn't have turned them loose if I'd wanted to. Men had heard the shots; they came runnin'; found me there holdin' a gun on those devils, and Joe Willoughby's body layin' on the floor, shot to pieces."

"I know. But we can't keep members of our own gang in jail, and we can't hand them over to the vigilantes. I've got to delay that trial, somehow. If I were ready, we'd jump tonight, and to hell with it. But I'm not ready. After all, perhaps it's as well this happened. It may give us our chance to skip. We're one jump ahead of the vigilantes and the gang, too. We know the vigilantes have formed and are ready to strike, and the rest of the gang don't. I've told no one but you what Hopkins told me early in the evening.

"Listen, Corcoran, we've got to move tomorrow night! I wanted to pull one last job, the biggest of all – the looting of Hopkins and Bisley's private cache. I believe I could have done it, in spite of all their guards and precautions. But we'll have to let that slide. I'll persuade Hopkins to put off the trial another day. I think I know how. Tomorrow night I'll have the vigilantes and the Vultures at each others' throats! We'll load the mules and pull out while they're

fighting. Once let us get a good start, and they're welcome to chase us if they want to.

"I'm going to find Hopkins now. You get back to the jail. If McNab talks to Miller or the others, be sure you listen to what's said."

Middleton found Hopkins in the Golden Eagle Saloon.

"I've come to ask a favor of you, Colonel," he began directly. "I want you, if it's possible, to put off the investigating trial until day after tomorrow. I've been talking to Joel Miller. He's cracking. If I can get him away from Barlow and Letcher, and talk to him, I believe he'll tell me everything I want to know. It'll be better to get his confession, signed and sworn to, before we bring the matter into court. Before a judge, with all eyes on him, and his friends in the crowd, he might stiffen and refuse to incriminate anyone. I don't believe the others will talk. But talking to me, alone, I believe Miller will spill the whole works. But it's going to take time to wear him down. I believe that by tomorrow night I'll have a full confession from him."

"That would make our work a great deal easier," admitted Hopkins.

"And another thing: these men ought to be represented by proper counsel. You'll prosecute them, of course; and the only other lawyer within reach is Judge Bixby, at Yankton. We're doing this thing in as close accordance to regular legal procedure as possible. Therefore we can't refuse the prisoner the right to be defended by an attorney. I've sent a man after Bixby. It will be late tomorrow evening before he can get back with the Judge, even if he has no trouble in locating him.

"Considering all these things, I feel it would be better to postpone the trial until we can get Bixby here, and until I can get Miller's confession."

"What will the camp think?"

"Most of them are men of reason. The few hotheads who might want to take matters into their own hands can't do any harm."

"All right," agreed Hopkins. "After all, they're your prisoners, since your deputy captured them, and the attempted murder of an officer of the law is one of the charges for which they'll have to

stand trial. We'll set the trial for day after tomorrow. Meanwhile, work on Joel Miller. If we have his signed confession, naming the leaders of the gang, it will expedite matters a great deal at the trial."

X

The Blood on the Gold

Wahpeton learned of the postponement of the trial and reacted in various ways. The air was surcharged with tension. Little work was done that day. Men gathering in heated, gesticulating groups, crowded in at the bars. Voices rose in hot altercation, fists pounded on the bars. Unfamiliar faces were observed, men who were seldom seen in the gulch – miners from claims in distant canyons, or more sinister figures from the hills, whose business was less obvious.

Lines of cleavage were noticed. Here and there clumps of men gathered, keeping to themselves and talking in low tones. In certain dives the ruffian element of the camp gathered, and these saloons were shunned by honest men. But still the great mass of the people milled about, suspicious and uncertain. The status of too many men was still in doubt. Certain men were known to be above suspicion, certain others were known to be ruffians and criminals; but between these two extremes there were possibilities for all shades of distrust and suspicion.

So most men wandered aimlessly to and fro, with their weapons ready to their hands, glancing at their fellows out of the corners of their eyes.

To the surprise of all, Steve Corcoran was noticed at several bars, drinking heavily, though the liquor did not seem to affect him in any way.

The men in the jail were suffering from nerves. Somehow the word had gotten out that the vigilante organization was a reality, and that they were to be tried before a vigilante court. Joel Miller, hysterical, accused Middleton of double-crossing his men.

"Shut up, you fool!" snarled the sheriff, showing the strain under which he was laboring merely by the irascible edge on his voice. "Haven't you seen your friends drifting by the jail? I've gathered the

men in from the hills. They're all here. Forty-odd men, every Vulture in the gang, is here in Wahpeton.

"Now, get this – and McNab, listen closely: we'll stage the break just before daylight, when everybody is asleep. Just before dawn is the best time, because that's about the only time in the whole twenty-four hours that the camp isn't going full blast.

"Some of the boys, with masks on, will swoop down and overpower you deputies. There'll be no shots fired until they've gotten the prisoners and started off. Then start yelling and shooting after them – in the air, of course. That'll bring everybody on the run to hear how you were overpowered by a gang of masked riders.

"Miller, you and Letcher and Barlow will put up a fight –"

"Why?"

"Why, you fool, to make it look like it's a mob that's capturing you, instead of friends rescuing you. That'll explain why none of the deputies are hurt. Men wanting to lynch you wouldn't want to hurt the officers. You'll yell and scream blue murder, and the men in the masks will drag you out, tie you and throw you across horses and ride off. Somebody is bound to see them riding away. It'll look like a capture, not a rescue."

Bearded lips gaped in admiring grins at the strategy.

"All right. Don't make a botch of it. There'll be hell to pay, but I'll convince Hopkins that it was the work of a mob, and we'll search the hills to find your bodies hanging from trees. We won't find any bodies, naturally, but maybe we'll contrive to find a mass of ashes where a log hut had been burned to the ground, and a few hats and belt buckles easy to identify."

Miller shivered at the implication and stared at Middleton with painful intensity.

"Middleton, you ain't planning to have us put out of the way? These men in masks are our friends, not vigilantes you've put up to this?"

"Don't be a fool!" flared Middleton disgustedly. "Do you think the gang would stand for anything like that, even if I was imbecile enough to try it? You'll recognize your friends when they come.

“Miller, I want your name at the foot of a confession I’ve drawn up, implicating somebody as the leader of the Vultures. There’s no use trying to deny you and the others are members of the gang. Hopkins knows you are; instead of trying to play innocent, you’ll divert suspicion to someone outside the gang. I haven’t filled in the name of the leader, but Dick Lennox is as good as anybody. He’s a gambler, has few friends, and never would work with us. I’ll write his name in your ‘confession’ as chief of the Vultures, and Corcoran will kill him ‘for resisting arrest,’ before he has time to prove that it’s a lie. Then, before anybody has time to get suspicious, we’ll make our last big haul – the raid on the Hopkins and Bisley cache! – and blow! Be ready to jump, when the gang swoops in.

“Miller, put your signature to this paper. Read it first if you want to. I’ll fill in the blanks I left for the ‘chief’s’ name later. Where’s Corcoran?”

“I saw him in the Golden Eagle an hour ago,” growled McNab. “He’s drinkin’ like a fish.”

“Damnation!” Middleton’s mask slipped a bit despite himself, then he regained his easy control. “Well, it doesn’t matter. We won’t need him tonight. Better for him not to be here when the jail break’s made. Folks would think it was funny if he didn’t kill somebody. I’ll drop back later in the night.”

Even a man of steel nerves feels the strain of waiting for a crisis. Corcoran was in this case no exception. Middleton’s mind was so occupied in planning, scheming and conniving that he had little time for the strain to corrode his will power. But Corcoran had nothing to occupy his attention until the moment came for the jump.

He began to drink, almost without realizing it. His veins seemed on fire, his external senses abnormally alert. Like most men of his breed he was high-strung, his nervous system poised on a hair-trigger balance, in spite of his mask of unemotional coolness. He lived on, and for, violent action. Action kept his mind from turning inward; it kept his brain clear and his hand steady; failing action, he

fell back on whisky. Liquor artificially stimulated him to that pitch which his temperament required. It was not fear that made his nerves thrum so intolerably. It was the strain of waiting inertly, the realization of the stakes for which they played. Inaction maddened him. Thought of the gold cached in the cave behind John Middleton's cabin made Corcoran's lips dry, set a nerve to pounding maddeningly in his temples.

So he drank, and drank, and drank again, as the long day wore on.

The noise from the bar was a blurred medley in the back room of the Golden Garter. Glory Bland stared uneasily across the table at her companion. Corcoran's blue eyes seemed lit by dancing fires. Tiny beads of perspiration shone on his dark face. His tongue was not thick; he spoke lucidly and without exaggeration; he had not stumbled when he entered. Nevertheless he was drunk, though to what extent the girl did not guess.

"I never saw you this way before, Steve," she said reproachfully.

"I've never had a hand in a game like this before," he answered, the wild flame flickering bluely in his eyes. He reached across the table and caught her white wrist with an unconscious strength that made her wince. "Glory, I'm pullin' out of here tonight. I want you to go with me!"

"You're leaving Wahpeton? *Tonight?"*

"Yes. For good. Go with me! This joint ain't fit for you. I don't know how you got into this game, and I don't give a damn. But you're different from these other dance hall girls. I'm takin' you with me. I'll make a queen out of you! I'll cover you with diamonds!"

She laughed nervously.

"You're drunker than I thought. I know you've been getting a big salary, but –"

"Salary?" His laugh of contempt startled her. "I'll throw my salary into the street for the beggars to fight over. Once I told that fool

Hopkins that I had a gold mine right here in Wahpeton. I told him no lie. I'm *rich!"*

"What do you mean?" She was slightly pale, frightened by his vehemence.

His fingers unconsciously tightened on her wrist and his eyes gleamed with the hard arrogance of possession and desire.

"You're mine, anyway," he muttered. "I'll kill any man that looks at you. But you're in love with me. I know it. Any fool could see it. I can trust you. You wouldn't dare betray me. I'll tell you. I wouldn't take you along without tellin' you the truth. Tonight Middleton and I are goin' over the mountains with a million dollars' worth of gold tied on pack mules!"

He did not see the growing light of incredulous horror in her eyes.

"A million in gold! It'd make a devil out of a saint! Middleton thinks he'll kill me when we get away safe, and grab the whole load. He's a fool. It'll be him that dies, when the time comes. I've planned while he planned. I didn't ever intend to split the loot with him. I wouldn't be a thief for less than a million."

"Middleton –" she choked.

"Yeah! He's chief of the Vultures, and I'm his right-hand man. If it hadn't been for me, the camp would have caught on long ago."

"But you upheld the law," she panted, as if clutching at straws. "You killed murderers – saved McBride from the mob."

"I killed men who tried to kill me. I shot as square with the camp as I could, without goin' against my own interests. That business of McBride has nothin' to do with it. I'd given him my word. That's all behind us now. Tonight, while the vigilantes and the Vultures kill each other, we'll *vamose!* And you'll go with me!"

With a cry of loathing she wrenched her hand away, and sprang up, her eyes blazing.

"Oh!" It was a cry of bitter disillusionment. "I thought you were straight – honest! I worshiped you because I thought you were honorable. So many men were dishonest and bestial – I idolized you! And you've just been pretending – playing a part! Betraying the people who trusted you!" The poignant anguish of her

enlightenment choked her, then galvanized her with another possibility.

"I suppose you've been pretending with me, too!" she cried wildly. "If you haven't been straight with the camp, you couldn't have been straight with me, either! You've made a fool of me! Laughed at me and shamed me! And now you boast of it in my teeth!"

"Glory!" He was on his feet, groping for her, stunned and bewildered by her grief and rage. She sprang back from him.

"Don't touch me! Don't look at me! Oh, I hate the very sight of you!"

And turning, with an hysterical sob, she ran from the room. He stood swaying slightly, staring stupidly after her. Then fumbling with his hat, he stalked out, moving like an automaton. His thoughts were a confused maelstrom, whirling until he was giddy. All at once the liquor seethed madly in his brain, dulling his perceptions, even his recollections of what had just passed. He had drunk more than he realized.

Not long after dark had settled over Wahpeton, a low call from the darkness brought Colonel Hopkins to the door of his cabin, gun in hand.

"Who is it?" he demanded suspiciously.

"It's Middleton. Let me in, quick!"

The sheriff entered, and Hopkins, shutting the door, stared at him in surprise. Middleton showed more agitation than the Colonel had ever seen him display. His face was pale and drawn. A great actor was lost to the world when John Middleton took the dark road of outlawry.

"Colonel, I don't know what to say. I've been a blind fool. I feel that the lives of murdered men are hung about my neck for all Eternity! All through my blindness and stupidity!"

"What do you mean, John?" ejaculated Colonel Hopkins.

"Colonel, Miller talked at last. He just finished telling me the whole dirty business. I have his confession, written as he dictated."

“He named the chief of the Vultures?” exclaimed Hopkins eagerly.

“He did!” answered Middleton grimly, producing a paper and unfolding it. Joel Miller’s unmistakable signature sprawled at the bottom. “Here is the name of the leader, dictated by Miller to me!”

“Good God!” whispered Hopkins. “Bill McNab!”

“Yes! My deputy! The man I trusted next to Corcoran. What a fool – what a blind fool I’ve been. Even when his actions seemed peculiar, even when you voiced your suspicions of him, I could not bring myself to believe it. But it’s all clear now. No wonder the gang always knew my plans as soon as I knew them myself! No wonder my deputies – before Corcoran came – were never able to kill or capture any Vultures. No wonder, for instance, that Tom Deal ‘escaped,’ before we could question him. That bullet hole in McNab’s arm, supposedly made by Deal – Miller told me McNab got that in a quarrel with one of his own gang. It came in handy to help pull the wool over my eyes.

“Colonel Hopkins, I’ll turn in my resignation tomorrow. I recommend Corcoran as my successor. I shall be glad to serve as deputy under him.”

“Nonsense, John!” Hopkins laid his hand sympathetically on Middleton’s shoulder. “It’s not your fault. You’ve played a man’s part all the way through. Forget that talk about resigning. Wahpeton doesn’t need a new sheriff; you just need some new deputies. Just now we’ve got some planning to do. Where is McNab?”

“At the jail, guarding the prisoners. I couldn’t remove him without exciting his suspicion. Of course he doesn’t dream that Miller has talked. And I learned something else. They plan a jail-break shortly after midnight.”

“We might have expected that!”

“Yes. A band of masked men will approach the jail, pretend to overpower the guards – yes, Stark and Richardson are Vultures, too – and release the prisoners. Now this is my plan. Take fifty men and conceal them in the trees near the jail. You can plant some on one side, some on the other. Corcoran and I will be with you, of course. When the bandits come, we can kill or capture them all at one

swoop. We have the advantage of knowing their plans, without their knowing we know them."

"That's a good plan, John!" warmly endorsed Hopkins. "You should have been a general. I'll gather the men at once. Of course, we must use the utmost secrecy."

"Of course. If we work it right, we'll bag prisoners, deputies and rescuers with one stroke. We'll break the back of the Vultures!"

"John, don't ever talk resignation to me again!" exclaimed Hopkins, grabbing his hat and buckling on his gun-belt. "A man like you ought to be in the Senate. Go get Corcoran. I'll gather my men and we'll be in our places before midnight. McNab and the others in the jail won't hear a sound."

"Good! Corcoran and I will join you before the Vultures reach the jail."

Leaving Hopkins' cabin, Middleton hurried to the bar of the King of Diamonds. As he drank, a rough-looking individual moved casually up beside him. Middleton bent his head over his whisky glass and spoke, hardly moving his lips. None could have heard him a yard away.

"I've just talked to Hopkins. The vigilantes are afraid of a jail break. They're going to take the prisoners out just before daylight and hang them out of hand. That talk about legal proceedings was just a bluff. Get all the boys, go to the jail and get the prisoners out within a half hour after midnight. Wear your masks, but let there be no shooting or yelling. I'll tell McNab our plan's been changed. Go silently. Leave your horses at least a quarter of a mile down the gulch and sneak up to the jail on foot, so you won't make so much noise. Corcoran and I will be hiding in the brush to give you a hand in case anything goes wrong."

The other man had not looked toward Middleton; he did not look now. Emptying his glass, he strolled deliberately toward the door. No casual onlooker could have known that any words had passed between them.

When Glory Bland ran from the backroom of the Golden Garter, her soul was in an emotional turmoil that almost amounted to insanity. The shock of her brutal disillusionment vied with passionate shame of her own gullibility and an unreasoning anger. Out of this seething cauldron grew a blind desire to hurt the man who had unwittingly hurt her. Smarting vanity had its part, too, for with characteristic and illogical feminine conceit, she believed that he had practiced an elaborate deception in order to fool her into falling in love with him – or rather with the man she thought he was. If he was false with men, he must be false with women, too. That thought sent her into hysterical fury, blind to all except a desire for revenge. She was a primitive, elemental young animal, like most of her profession of that age and place; her emotions were powerful and easily stirred, her passions stormy. Love could change quickly to hate.

She reached an instant decision. She would find Hopkins and tell him everything Corcoran had told her! In that instant she desired nothing so much as the ruin of the man she had loved.

She ran down the crowded street, ignoring men who pawed at her and called after her. She hardly saw the people who stared after her. She supposed that Hopkins would be at the jail, helping guard the prisoners, and she directed her steps thither. As she ran up on the porch Bill McNab confronted her with a leer, and laid a hand on her arm, laughing when she jerked away.

“Come to see me, Glory? Or are you lookin’ for Corcoran?”

She struck his hand away. His words, and the insinuating guffaws of his companions were sparks enough to touch off the explosives seething in her.

“You fool! You’re being sold out, and don’t know it!”

The leer vanished.

“What do you mean?” he snarled.

“I mean that your boss is fixing to skip out with all the gold you thieves have grabbed!” she blurted, heedless of consequences, in her emotional storm, indeed scarcely aware of what she was saying. “He and Corcoran are going to leave you holding the sack, tonight!”

And not seeing the man she was looking for, she eluded McNab's grasp, jumped down from the porch and darted away in the darkness.

The deputies stared at each other, and the prisoners, having heard everything, began to clamor to be turned out.

"Shut up!" snarled McNab. "She may be lyin'. Might have had a quarrel with Corcoran and took this fool way to get even with him. We can't afford to take no chances. We've got to be sure we know what we're doin' before we move either way. We can't afford to let you out now, on the chance that she might be lyin'. But we'll give you weapons to defend yourselves.

"Here, take these rifles and hide 'em under the bunks. Pete Daley, you stay here and keep folks shooed away from the jail till we get back. Richardson, you and Stark come with me! We'll have a showdown with Middleton right now!"

When Glory left the jail she headed for Hopkins' cabin. But she had not gone far when a reaction shook her. She was like one waking from a nightmare, or a dope-jag. She was still sickened by the discovery of Corcoran's duplicity in regard to the people of the camp, but she began to apply reason to her suspicions of his motives in regard to herself. She began to realize that she had acted illogically. If Corcoran's attitude toward her was not sincere, he certainly would not have asked her to leave the camp with him. At the expense of her vanity she was forced to admit that his attentions to her had not been necessary in his game of duping the camp. That was something apart; his own private business; it must be so. She had suspected him of trifling with her affections, but she had to admit that she had no proof that he had ever paid the slightest attention to any other woman in Wahpeton. No; whatever his motives or actions in general, his feeling toward her must be sincere and real.

With a shock she remembered her present errand, her reckless words to McNab. Despair seized her, in which she realized that she loved Steve Corcoran in spite of all he might be. Chill fear seized her that McNab and his friends would kill her lover. Her unreasoning fury died out, gave way to frantic terror.

Turning she ran swiftly down the gulch toward Corcoran's cabin. She was hardly aware of it when she passed through the blazing heart of the camp. Lights and bearded faces were like a nightmarish blur, in which nothing was real but the icy terror in her heart.

She did not realize it when the clusters of cabins fell behind her. The patter of her slippered feet in the road terrified her, and the black shadows under the trees seemed pregnant with menace. Ahead of her she saw Corcoran's cabin at last, a light streaming through the open door. She burst in to the office-room, panting – and was confronted by Middleton who wheeled with a gun in his hand.

"What the devil are you doing here?" He spoke without friendliness, though he returned the gun to its scabbard.

"Where's Corcoran?" she panted. Fear took hold of her as she faced the man she now knew was the monster behind the grisly crimes that had made a reign of terror over Wahpeton Gulch. But fear for Corcoran overshadowed her own terror.

"I don't know. I looked for him through the bars a short time ago, and didn't find him. I'm expecting him here any minute. What do you want with him?"

"That's none of your business," she flared.

"It might be." He came toward her, and the mask had fallen from his dark, handsome face. It looked wolfish.

"You were a fool to come here. You pry into things that don't concern you. You know too much. You talk too much. Don't think I'm not wise to you! I know more about you than you suspect."

A chill fear froze her. Her heart seemed to be turning to ice. Middleton was like a stranger to her, a terrible stranger. The mask was off, and the evil spirit of the man was reflected in his dark, sinister face. His eyes burned her like actual coals.

"I didn't pry into secrets," she whispered with dry lips. "I didn't ask any questions. I never before suspected you were the chief of the Vultures –"

The expression of his face told her she had made an awful mistake.

“So you know that!” His voice was soft, almost a whisper, but murder stood stark and naked in his flaming eyes. “I didn’t know that. I was talking about something else. Conchita told me it was you who told Corcoran about the plan to lynch McBride. I wouldn’t have killed you for that, though it interfered with my plans. But you know too much. After tonight it wouldn’t matter. But tonight’s not over yet –”

“Oh!” she moaned, staring with dilated eyes as the big pistol slid from its scabbard in a dull gleam of blue steel. She could not move, she could not cry out. She could only cower dumbly until the crash of the shot knocked her to the floor.

As Middleton stood above her, the smoking gun in his hand, he heard a stirring in the room behind him. He quickly upset the long table, so it could hide the body of the girl, and turned, just as the door opened. Corcoran came from the back room, blinking, a gun in his hand. It was evident that he had just awakened from a drunken sleep, but his hands did not shake, his pantherish tread was sure as ever, and his eyes were neither dull nor bloodshot.

Nevertheless Middleton swore.

“Corcoran, are you crazy?”

“You shot?”

“I shot at a snake that crawled across the floor. You must have been mad, to soak up liquor today, of all days!”

“I’m all right,” muttered Corcoran, shoving his gun back in its scabbard.

“Well, come on. I’ve got the mules in the clump of trees next to my cabin. Nobody will see us load them. Nobody will see us go. We’ll go up the ravine beyond my cabin, as we planned. There’s nobody watching my cabin tonight. All the Vultures are down in the camp, waiting for the signal to move. I’m hoping none will escape the vigilantes, and that most of the vigilantes themselves are killed in the fight that’s sure to come. Come on! We’ve got thirty mules to load, and that job will take us from now until midnight, at least. We won’t pull out until we hear the guns on the other side of the camp.”

“Listen!”

It was footsteps, approaching the cabin almost at a run. Both men wheeled and stood motionless as McNab loomed in the door. He lurched into the room, followed by Richardson and Stark. Instantly the air was supercharged with suspicion, hate, tension. Silence held for a tick of time.

“You fools!” snarled Middleton. “What are you doing away from the jail?”

“We came to talk to you,” said McNab. “We’ve heard that you and Corcoran planned to skip with the gold.”

Never was Middleton’s superb self-control more evident. Though the shock of that blunt thunderbolt must have been terrific, he showed no emotion that might not have been showed by any honest man, falsely accused.

“Are you utterly mad?” he ejaculated, not in a rage, but as if amazement had submerged whatever anger he might have felt at the charge.

McNab shifted his great bulk uneasily, not sure of his ground. Corcoran was not looking at him, but at Richardson, in whose cold eyes a lethal glitter was growing. More quickly than Middleton, Corcoran sensed the inevitable struggle in which this situation must culminate.

“I’m just sayin’ what we heard. Maybe it’s so, maybe it ain’t. If it ain’t, there’s no harm done,” said McNab slowly. “On the chance that it was so, I sent word for the boys not to wait till midnight. They’re goin’ to the jail within the next half hour and take Miller and the rest out.”

Another breathless silence followed that statement. Middleton did not bother to reply. His eyes began to smolder. Without moving, he yet seemed to crouch, to gather himself for a spring. He had realized what Corcoran had already sensed; that this situation was not to be passed over by words, that a climax of violence was inevitable.

Richardson knew this; Stark seemed merely puzzled. McNab, if he had any thoughts, concealed the fact.

“Say you was intendin’ to skip,” he said, “this might be a good chance, while the boys was takin’ Miller and them off up into the hills. I don’t know. I ain’t accusin’ you. I’m just askin’ you to clear yourself. You can do it easy. Just come back to the jail with us and help get the boys out.”

Middleton’s answer was what Richardson, instinctive man-killer, had sensed it would be. He whipped out a gun in a blur of speed. And even as it cleared leather, Richardson’s gun was out. But Corcoran had not taken his eyes off the cold-eyed gunman, and his draw was the quicker by a lightning-flicker. Quick as was Middleton, both the other guns spoke before his, like a double detonation. Corcoran’s slug blasted Richardson’s brains just in time to spoil his shot at Middleton. But the bullet grazed Middleton so close that it caused him to miss McNab with his first shot.

McNab’s gun was out and Stark was a split second behind him. Middleton’s second shot and McNab’s first crashed almost together, but already Corcoran’s guns had sent lead ripping through the giant’s flesh. His ball merely flicked Middleton’s hair in passing, and the chief’s slug smashed full into his brawny breast. Middleton fired again and yet again as the giant was falling. Stark was down, dying on the floor, having pulled trigger blindly as he fell, until the gun was empty.

Middleton stared wildly about him, through the floating blue fog of smoke that veiled the room. In that fleeting instant, as he glimpsed Corcoran's image-like face, he felt that only in such a setting as this did the Texan appear fitted. Like a somber figure of Fate he moved implacably against a background of blood and slaughter.

"God!" gasped Middleton. "That was the quickest, bloodiest fight I was ever in!" Even as he talked he was jamming cartridges into his empty gun chambers.

"We've got no time to lose now! I don't know how much McNab told the gang of his suspicions. He must not have told them much, or some of them would have come with him. Anyway, their first move will be to liberate the prisoners. I have an idea they'll go through with that just as we planned, even when McNab doesn't return to lead them. They won't come looking for him, or come after us, until they turn Miller and the others loose.

"It just means the fight will come within the half hour instead of at midnight. The vigilantes will be there by that time. They're probably lying in ambush already. Come on! We've got to sling gold on those mules like devils. We may have to leave some of it; we'll know when the fight's started, by the sound of the guns! One thing, nobody will come up here to investigate the shooting. All attention is focused on the jail!"

Corcoran followed him out of the cabin, then turned back with a muttered: "Left a bottle of whisky in that back room."

"Well, hurry and get it and come on!" Middleton broke into a run toward his cabin, and Corcoran re-entered the smoke-veiled room. He did not glance at the crumpled bodies which lay on the crimson-stained floor, staring glassily up at him. With a stride he reached the back room, groped in his bunk until he found what he wanted, and then strode again toward the outer door, the bottle in his hand.

The sound of a low moan brought him whirling about, a gun in his left hand. Startled, he stared at the figures on the floor. He knew none of them had moaned; all three were past moaning. Yet his ears had not deceived him.

His narrowed eyes swept the cabin suspiciously, and focused on a thin trickle of crimson that stole from under the upset table as it lay on its side near the wall. None of the corpses lay near it.

He pulled aside the table and halted as if shot through the heart, his breath catching in a convulsive gasp. An instant later he was kneeling beside Glory Bland, cradling her golden head in his arm. His hand, as he brought the whisky bottle to her lips, shook queerly.

Her magnificent eyes lifted toward him, glazed with pain. But by some miracle the delirium faded, and she knew him in her last few moments of life.

"Who did this?" he choked. Her white throat was laced by a tiny trickle of crimson from her lips.

"Middleton –" she whispered. "Steve, oh, Steve – I tried –" And with the whisper uncompleted she went limp in his arms. Her golden head lolled back; she seemed like a child, a child just fallen asleep. Dazedly he eased her to the floor.

Corcoran's brain was clear of liquor as he left the cabin, but he staggered like a drunken man. The monstrous, incredible thing that had happened left him stunned, hardly able to credit his own senses. It had never occurred to him that Middleton would kill a woman, that any white man would. Corcoran lived by his own code, and it was wild and rough and hard, violent and incongruous, but it included the conviction that womankind was sacred, immune from the violence that attended the lives of men. This code was as much a vital, living element of the life of the Southwestern frontier as was personal honor, and the resentment of insult. Without pompousness, without pretentiousness, without any of the tawdry glitter and sham of a false chivalry, the people of Corcoran's breed practiced this code in their daily lives. To Corcoran, as to his people, a woman's life and body were inviolate. It had never occurred to him that that code would, or could, be violated, or that there could be any other kind.

Cold rage swept the daze from his mind and left him crammed to the brim with murder. His feelings toward Glory Bland had approached the normal love experienced by the average man as closely as was possible for one of his iron nature. But if she had

been a stranger, or even a person he had disliked, he would have killed Middleton for outraging a code he had considered absolute.

He entered Middleton's cabin with the soft stride of a stalking panther. Middleton was bringing bulging buckskin sacks from the cave, heaping them on a table in the main room. He staggered with their weight. Already the table was almost covered.

"Get busy!" he exclaimed. Then he halted short, at the blaze in Corcoran's eyes. The fat sacks spilled from his arms, thudding on the floor.

"You killed Glory Bland!" It was almost a whisper from the Texan's livid lips.

"Yes." Middleton's voice was even. He did not ask how Corcoran knew, he did not seek to justify himself. He knew the time for argument was past. He did not think of his plans, or of the gold on the table, or that still back there in the cave. A man standing face to face with Eternity sees only the naked elements of life and death.

"Draw!" A catamount might have spat the challenge, eyes flaming, teeth flashing.

Middleton's hand was a streak to his gun butt. Even in that flash he knew he was beaten – heard Corcoran's gun roar just as he pulled trigger. He swayed back, falling, and in a blind gust of passion Corcoran emptied both guns into him as he crumpled.

For a long moment that seemed ticking into Eternity the killer stood over his victim, a somber, brooding figure that might have been carved from the iron night of the Fates. Off toward the other end of the camp other guns burst forth suddenly, in salvo after thundering salvo. The fight that was plotted to mask the flight of the Vulture chief had begun. But the figure which stood above the dead man in the lonely cabin did not seem to hear.

Corcoran looked down at his victim, vaguely finding it strange, after all, that all those bloody schemes and terrible ambitions should end like that, in a puddle of oozing blood on a cabin floor. He lifted his head to stare somberly at the bulging sacks on the table. Revulsion gagged him.

A sack had split, spilling a golden stream that glittered evilly in the candle-light. His eyes were no longer blinded by the yellow sheen. For the first time he saw the blood on that gold, it was black with blood; the blood of innocent men; the blood of a woman. The mere thought of touching it nauseated him, made him feel as if the slime that had covered John Middleton's soul would befoul him. Sickly he realized that some of Middleton's guilt was on his own head. He had not pulled the trigger that ripped a woman's life from her body; but he had worked hand-in-glove with the man destined to be her murderer – Corcoran shuddered and a clammy sweat broke out upon his flesh.

Down the gulch the firing had ceased, faint yells came to him, freighted with victory and triumph. Many men must be shouting at once, for the sound to carry so far. He knew what it portended; the Vultures had walked into the trap laid for them by the man they trusted as a leader. Since the firing had ceased, it meant the whole band were either dead or captives. Wahpeton's reign of terror had ended.

But he must stir. There would be prisoners, eager to talk. Their speech would weave a noose about his neck.

He did not glance again at the gold, gleaming there where the honest people of Wahpeton would find it. Striding from the cabin he swung on one of the horses that stood saddled and ready among the trees. The lights of the camp, the roar of the distant voices fell away behind him, and before him lay what wild destiny he could not guess. But the night was full of haunting shadows, and within him grew a strange pain, like a revelation; perhaps it was his soul, at last awakening.

OceanofPDF.com

Gents on the Lynch

Blue Lizard, Colorado,
September 1, 1879.

Mister Washington Bearfield, Antioch, Colorado.

Dear Brother Wash:

Well, Wash, I reckon you think you air smart persuading me to quit my job with the Seven Prong Pitchfork outfit and come way up here in the mountains to hunt gold. I knowed from the start I warn't no prospector, but you talked so much you got me addled and believing what you said, and the first thing I knowed I had quit my job and withdrawed from the race for sheriff of Antioch and was on my way. Now I think about it, it is a dern funny thing you got so anxious for me to go prospecting jest as elections was coming up. You never before showed no anxiety for me to git rich finding gold or no other way. I am going to hunt me a quiet spot and set down and study this over for a few hours, and if I decide you had some personal reason for wanting me out of Antioch, I aim to make you hard to ketch.

All my humiliating experiences in Blue Lizard is yore fault, and the more I think about it, the madder I git. And yet it all come from my generous nature which cain't endure to see a feller critter in distress onless I got him that way myself.

Well, about four days after I left Antioch I hove into the Blue Lizard country one forenoon, riding Satanta and leading my pack mule, and I was passing through a canyon about three mile from the camp when I heard dawgs baying. The next minute I seen three of them setting around a big oak tree barking fit to bust yore ear-drums. I rode up to see what they'd treed and I'm a Injun if it warn't a human being! It was a tall man without no hat nor gun in his

scabbard, and he was cussing them dawgs so vigorous he didn't hear me till I rode up and says: "Hey, what you doin' up there?"

He like to fell out of the crotch he was setting in, and then he looked down at me very sharp for a instant, and said: "I taken refuge from them vicious beasts. I was goin' along mindin' my own business when they taken in after me. I think they got hyderphoby. I'll give you five bucks if you'll shoot 'em. I lost my gun."

"I don't want no five bucks," I says. "But I ain't goin' to shoot 'em. They're pecooliar lookin' critters, and they may be valurebul. I notice the funnier-lookin' a animal is, the more money they're generally wuth. I'll shoo 'em off."

So I got down and says: "Git!" and they immejitly laid holt of my laigs, which was very irritating because I didn't have no other boots but them. So I fotched each one of them fool critters a hearty kick in the rear, and they give a yowl and scooted for the tall timber.

"You can come down now," I says. "Dern it, them varmints has rooint my boots."

"Take mine!" says he, sliding down and yanking off his boots.

"Aw, I don't want to do that," I says, but he says: "I insists! It's all I can do for you. Witherington T. Jones always pays his debts, even in adversity! You behold in me a lone critter buffeted on the winds of chance, penniless and friendless, but grateful! Take my boots, kind stranger, do!"

Well, I was embarrassed and sorry for him, so I said all right, and taken his boots and give him mine. They was too big for him, but he seemed mighty pleased when he hauled 'em on. His'n was very handsome, all fancy stitching. He shaken my hand and said I'd made him very happy, but all to once he bust into tears and sobbed: "Pore Joe!"

"Pore who?" I ast.

"Joe!" says he, wiping his eyes on my bandanner. "My partner, up on our claim in the hills. I warned him agen drinkin' a gallon of corn juice to inoculate hisself agen snake-bite – before the snake bit him – but he wouldn't listen, so now he's writhin' in the throes of

delirium tremens. It would bust yore heart to hear the way he shrieks for me to shoot the polka-dotted rhinocerhosses which he thinks is gnawin' his toes. I left him tied hand and foot and howlin' that a striped elephant was squattin' on his bosom, and I went to Blue Lizard for medicine. I got it, but them cussed dawgs scairt my hoss and he got away from me, and it'll take me till midnight to git back to our claim afoot. Pore Joe'll be a ravin' corpse by then."

Well, I never heard of a corpse raving, but I couldn't stand the idee of a man dying from the d.t.'s, so I shucked my pack offa my mule, and said: "Here, take this mule and skeet for yore claim. He'll be better'n walkin'. I'd lend you Satanta only he won't let nobody but me ride him."

Mister Witherington T. Jones was plumb overcome by emotion. He shaken my hand again and said: "My noble friend, I'll never forgit this!" And then he jumped on the mule and lit out, and from the way he was kicking the critter's ribs I reckoned he'd pull into his claim before noon, if it was anywheres within a hundred miles of there. He sure warn't wasting no time. I could see that.

I hung his boots onto my saddle horn and I had started gathering up my plunder when I heard men yelling and then a whole gang with Winchesters come busting through the trees, and they seen me and hollered: "Where is he?"

"We heard the dawgs bayin' over here," says a little short one. "I don't hear 'em now. But they must of had him treed somewheres clost by."

"Oh, Mr. Jones," I said. "Well, don't worry about him. He's all right. I druv the dawgs off and and lent him my mule to git back to his claim."

At this they let forth loud frenzied yells. It was plumb amazing. Here I'd jest rescued a feller human from a pack of ferocious animals, and these hombres acted like I'd did a crime or something.

"He helped him git awayl" they hollered. "Le's lynch him, the derned outlaw!"

"Who you callin' a outlaw?" I demanded. "I'm a stranger in these parts. I'm headin' for Blue Lizard to work me a claim."

“You jest helped a criminal to escape!” gnashed they, notably a big black-bearded galoot with a sawed-off shotgun. “This feller Jones as you call him tried to rob a stage coach over on Cochise Mountain less’n a hour ago. The guard shot his pistol out of his hand, and his hoss got hit too, so he broke away on foot. We sot the dawgs on his trail, and we’d of had him by now, if you hadn’t butted in! Now the dawgs cain’t track him no more.”

“Call ’em back and set ’em on the mule’s trail,” sejests a squint-eyed cuss. “As for you, you cussed Texas hill-billy, you keep on travelin’. We don’t want no man like you in Blue Lizard.”

“Go to the devil, you flat-nosed buzzard,” I retort with typical Southern courtesy. “This here’s a free country. I come up here to hunt gold and I aim to hunt it if I have to lick every prospector in Lizard Cañon! You cain’t ride me jest because I made a honest mistake that anybody could of made. Anyway, I’m the loser, ’cause he got off with my mule.”

“Aw, come on and le’s find the dawgs,” says a bow-legged gun-toter with warts. So they went off up the cañon, breathing threats and vengeance, and I taken my plunder on my shoulder and went on down the cañon, leading Satanta. I put on Mister Jones’s boots first, and they was too small for me, of course, but I could wear ’em in a pinch. (That there is a joke, Wash, but I don’t suppose you got sense enough to see the p’int.)

I soon come to the aidge of the camp, which was spread all over the place where the canyon widened out and shallowed, and the first man I seen was old Polk Williams. You remember him, Wash, we knowed him over to Trinidad when we first come to Colorado with the Seven Prong Pitchfork outfit. I hailed him and ast him where I could find a good claim, and he said all the good ones had been took. So I said, well, I’d strike out up in the hills and hunt me one, and he says: “What you know about prospectin’? I advises you to git a job of workin’ some other man’s claim at day wages till they’s a new strike up in the hills somewheres. They’s bound to be one any day, because the mountains is full of prospectors which got here too

late to git in on this'n. Plenty of jobs here at big wages, because nobody wants to *work*. They all wants to wade creeks till they stub their fool toe on a pocket of nuggets."

"All right," I said. "I'll pitch my camp down on the creek."

"You better not," says he. "These mountains is full of hyderphoby skunks. They crawls in yore blankets at night and bites you, and you foam at the mouth and go bite yore best friends. Now, it jest happens I got a spare cabin which I ain't usin'. The feller who had it rented ain't with us this mornin' account of a extry ace in a poker game last night. I'll rent it to you dirt cheap – ten dollars a day. You'll be safe from them cussed skunks there."

So I said: "All right. I don't want to git hyderphoby."

So I give him ten dollars in advance and put my plunder in the cabin which was on a slope west of the camp, and hobbled Satanta to graze. He said I better look out or somebody would steal Satanta. He said Mustang Stirling and his outlaws was hiding in the hills clost by and terrorizing the camp which didn't even have a sheriff yet, because folks hadn't had time to elect one, but they was gittin so sick of being robbed all the time they probably would soon, and maybe organize a Vigilante Committee, too. But I warn't scairt of anybody stealing Satanta. A stranger had better take a cougar by the whiskers than to monkey with Satanta. That hoss has got a disposition like a sore-tailed rattlesnake.

Well, while we was talking I seen a gal come out from amongst the cluster of stores and saloons and things, and head up the canyon with a bucket in her hand. She was so purty my heart skipped a beat and my corns begun to throb. That's a sure sign of love at first sight.

"Who's that gal?" I ast.

"Hannah Sprague," says Polk. "The belle of Blue Lizard. But *you* needn't start castin' sheep's eyes at her. They's a dozen young bucks sparkin' her already. I think Blaze Wellington's the favorite to put his brand onto her, though. She wouldn't look twicet at a hill-billy like you."

"I might remove the compertition," I sejested.

“You better not try no Wolf Mountain rough stuff in Blue Lizard,” warned he. “The folks is so worked up over all these robberies and killin’s they’re jest in a mood to lynch somebody, especially a stranger.”

But I give no heed. Folks is always wanting to lynch me, and quite a few has tried, as numerous tombstones on the boundless prairies testifies.

“Where’s she goin’ with that bucket?” I ast him, and he said: “She’s takin’ beer to her old man which is workin’ a claim up the creek.”

“Well, listen,” I says. “You git over there behind that thicket and when she comes past you make a noise like a Injun.”

“What kind of damfoolishness is this?” he demanded. “You want to stampede the hull camp?”

“Don’t make a loud whoop,” I says. “Jest make it loud enough for her to hear it.”

“Air you crazy?” says he.

“No, dern it!” I said fiercely, because she was tripping along purty fast. “Git in there and do like I say. I’ll rush up from the other side and pertend to rescue her from the Injuns, and that’ll make her like me.”

“I mistrusts you’re a blasted fool,” he grumbled. “But I’ll do it jest this oncet.”

He snuck into the thicket which she’d have to pass on the other side, and I circled around so she couldn’t see me till I was ready to rush out and save her from being sculped. Well, I warn’t hardly in place when I heard a kind of mild war-whoop and it sounded jest like a Blackfoot, only not so loud. But immejitly there come the crack of a pistol and another yell which warn’t subdued like the first. It was lusty and energetic.

I run towards the thicket, but before I could git into the open trail old Polk come b’ilin’ out of the back side of the clump with his hands to the seat of his britches.

“You planned this a-purpose, you snake in the grass!” he squalled. “Git outa my way!”

“Why, Polk!” I says. “What happened?”

“I bet you knowed she had a derringer in her stocking,” he howled as he run past me with his pants smoking. “It’s all yore fault! When I whooped she pulled it and shot into the bresh! Don’t speak to me! I’m lucky that I warn’t hit in a vital spot. I’ll git even with you for this if it takes a hundred years!”

He headed on into the deep bresh, and I run around the thicket and seen Hannah Sprague peering into it with her gun smoking in her hand. She looked up as I come onto the trail, and I taken off my hat and said perlite: “Howdy, Miss. Can I be of no assistance to you?”

“I jest shot a Injun,” says she. “I heard him holler. You might go in there and git the sculp, if you don’t mind. I’d like to have it for a soovenear.”

“I’ll be glad to, Miss,” I says gallantly. “I’ll likewise kyore and tan it for you myself.”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” she says, dimpling. “It’s a pleasure to meet a real gent like you!”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” I assured her, and went into the bresh and stomped around a little, and then come out and says: “I’m arful sorry, Miss, but the varmint ain’t nowheres to be found. You must of jest winged him. If you want me to, I’ll take his trail and run him down.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think of puttin’ you to sech trouble,” she says, much to my relief, because I was jest thinking that if she did demand a sculp, the only thing I could do would be to ketch old Polk and sculp him, and I’d hate to have to do that. I bet it would of made him arful mad.

But she looked me over admiringly and says: “I’m Hannah Sprague.

Who’re you?”

“I knowed you the minute I seen you,” I says. “The fame of yore beauty has reached clean to Wolf Mountain, Texas. I’m Pike Bearfield.”

“Glad to meetcha, Mister Bearfield,” says she. “They must grow big men in Texas. Well, I got to go now. Pap gits arful tetchy if he don’t git his beer along with his dinner.”

“I’d admire powerful to call on you this evenin’,” I says, and she says, “Well, I dunno. Mister Blaze Wellington was goin’ to call –”

“He cain’t come,” I says.

“Why, how do you know?” she ast surprised. “He said –”

“A unforeseen circumstance,” I says gently. “It ain’t happened to him yet, but it’s goin’ to right away.”

“Well,” she says, kind of confused, “I reckon in that case you can come on, if you want. We live in that cabin down yonder by that big fir. But when you git within hearin’ holler and tell us who you be, if it’s after dark. Pap is arful nervous account of all these outlaws which is robbin’ people.”

So I said I would, and she went on, and I headed for the camp. People give me some suspicious looks, and I heard a lot of folks talking about this here Mustang Stirling and his gang. Seems like them critters hid in the hills and robbed somebody nearly every day and night, and nobody could hardly git their gold out of camp without gittin’ stuck up. But I didn’t have no gold yet, and wouldn’t of been scairt of Mustang Stirling if I had, so I went on to the biggest saloon, which they called the Belle of New York. I taken a dram and ast the bartender if he knowed Blaze Wellington. He said sure he did, and I ast him where Blaze Wellington was, and he p’inted out a young buck which was setting at a table with his head down on his hands like he was trying to study out something. So I went over and sot down opposite him, and he looked up and seen me, and fell out of his chair backwards hollering: “Don’t shoot!”

“Why, how did you know?” I ast, surprised.

“By yore evil face,” he gibbered. “Go ahead! Do yore wust!”

“They ain’t no use to git highsterical,” I says. “If you’ll be reasonable nobody won’t git hurt.”

“I won’t tell you whar it’s hid!” he defied, gitting onto his feet and looking like a cornered wharf-rat.

“Where what’s hid?” I ast in amazement.

At this he looked kind of dumfounded.

“Say,” says he cautiously, “ain’t you one of Mustang Stirling’s spies, after the gold?”

“Naw, I ain’t,” I says angrily. “I jest come here to ast you like a gent not to call on Hannah Sprague tonight.”

“What the devil?” says he, looking kind of perplexed and relieved and mad all at the same time. “What you mean, not call on Hannah?”

“Because I am,” I says, hitching my guns for’ard.

“Who the devil air you?” he demanded, convulsively picking up a beer mug like he aimed to throw it at me.

“Pike Bearfield of Wolf Mountain,” I says, and he says: “Oh!” and after a minute he puts the beer mug down and stood there studying a while.

Then he says: “Why, Bearfield, they warn’t no use in you threatenin’ me. I bet you think I’m in love with Hannah Sprague! Well, I ain’t. I’m a friend of her old man, that’s all. I been keepin’ his gold over to my shack, guardin’ it for him, so Mustang Stirling’s outlaws wouldn’t git it, and the old man is so grateful he wants me to marry the gal. But I don’t keer nothin’ about her.

“To tell you the truth, if it warn’t that I like the old man, I’d throw up the job, it’s so dangerous. Mustang Stirling has got spies in the camp, and they dogs me night and day. I thought you was one of ’em when I seen yore arful face … Well, I’m glad the old man’s goin’ to send it out on the stage tomorrer. It’s been an arful strain on me and my partner, which is over at the shack now. Somebody’s got to stay there on guard all the time, or them cussed outlaws would come right in and tear the shack apart and find where I got it hid. Tonight’ll be the wust. They’ll make a desprut effort to git it before mornin’.”

“You mean old man Sprague wants you to marry Hannah because yo’re guardin’ his gold?” I ast, and he says yes, but the responsibility was aging him prematurely. I says: “Looky here! Lemme take this job off’n yore hands! Lemme guard the gold tonight! I hates to see a

promisin' young man like you wore down to a nubbin by care and worry."

"I hate to do that," he demurred, but I said: "Come on, be a good feller! I'll do as much for you, some time."

He thought it over a while, shaking his head, whilst I was on needles and pins, and then he stuck out his hand and said: "I'll do it! Shake! But don't tell nobody. I wouldn't do it for nobody but you … What's that noise?"

Because we heard a lot of men running up the street and yelling: "Git yore guns ready, boys! We're right on his trail!"

Somebody hollered "Who?" And somebody else yelled: "Jones! The hounds picked up his foot-tracks whilst we was tryin' to git 'em after the mule's! He musta jumped offa the mule and doubled back afoot! We've trailed him right down Main Street!"

Then somebody else whooped: "They're goin' into the Belle of New York! We got him cornered! Don't let him git away!"

The next minute here come them three fool bloodhounds b'ilin' in at the front door and grabbed me by the hind laig again. It was most ann'ying. I dunno when I was ever so sick of a pack of hounds in my life. But I controlled my temper and merely jerked 'em loose from my laig and throwed 'em out the winder, and they run off. Then a crowd of faces jammed in the door and looked at me wildly and said: "You again!"

I recognized Black-Beard and Squint-Eye and Shorty and Warts and the rest of the men which was in the posse chasing Mister Jones, and I said fretfully: "Gol-dern it, whyn't you all lemme alone?"

But they ignored my remark, and Squint-Eye said: "I thought we told you not to stop in Blue Lizard!"

Before I could think of anything insulting enough to say in response, Warts give a yelp and p'inted at my laigs.

"Look there!" he howled. "He's got on Jones's boots! I was on the stage coach when Jones tried to hold it up, and he had on a mask, but I remember them boots! Don't you remember – this hill-billy

didn’t have on no boots when we seen him before! He traded boots with Jones to fool the dawgs! No wonder they wouldn’t foller the mule! He’s a derned outlaw! He knowed what Jones’s name was! He’s one of Stirling’s spies! Git him!”

I started to tell Blaze to tell ’em I was all right, but at this moment Shorty was so overcome by excitement that he throwed a cuspidor at me. I ducked and it hit Blaze betwixt the eyes and he curled up under the table with a holler gasp.

“Now look what you done!” I says wrathfully, but all Shorty says is to holler: “Grab him, boys! Here’s where we starts cleaning up this camp right now! Let the hangin’s commence!”

If he hadn’t made that last remark, I probably wouldn’t of broke his arm when he tried to stab me with his bowie, but I’m kind of sensitive about being hung. I would of avoided vi’lence if I could of, but sech remarks convinced me that them idjits was liable to do me bodily harm, especially when some of ’em grabbed me around the laigs and five or six more tried to twist my arms around behind my back. So I give a heave and slung them loose from me which was hanging onto my arms, and then I ast the others ca’mly and with dignity to let go of me before I injured ’em fatally, but they replied profanely that I was a dadgasted outlaw and they was going to hang me if it was the last thing any of ’em done. They also tried to rassle

me off my feet and Black-Beard hit me over the head with a beer bottle.

This made me mad, so I walked over to the bar with nine or ten of 'em hanging onto me and bracing their feet in a futile effort to stop me, and I stooped and tore up a ten-foot section of brass rail, and at the first swipe I laid out Black-Beard and Squint-Eye and Warts, and at the second I laid out four more gents which was perfect strangers to me, and when I heaved her up for the third swipe they warn't nobody in the saloon but me and them on the floor. It is remarkable the number of men you can fotch at one lick with a ten-foot section of brass railing. The way the survivors stampeded out the front door yelling blue murder you'd of thought it was the first time anybody had ever used a brass rail on 'em.

Blaze was beginning to come to, so I hauled him out from under the table, and lugged him out onto the street with me. Some fellers on the other side of the street immejitly started shooting at me, so I drawed my pistols and shot back at 'em, and they broke and run every which a way. So I got Blaze onto my back and started up the street with him, and after I'd went a few hundred yards he could walk hisself, though he weaved considerable, and he taken the lead and led me to his cabin which was back of some stores and clost to the bank of the creek. They warn't nobody in sight but a loafer setting under a tree on the bank fishing, with his slouch hat pulled down to shade his eyes. The door was shet, so Blaze hollered, still kind of dizzy: "It's me, Branner; open up!"

So another young feller opened the door and looked out cautious with a double-barreled shotgun, and Blaze says to me: "Wait here whilst I go in and git the gold."

So I did and after a while he come out lugging a good-sized buckskin poke which I jedged from the weight they must be several thousand dollars worth of nuggets in there.

"I'll never forget this," I said warmly. "You go tell Hannah I cain't come to see her tonight because I'm guardin' her old man's gold. I'll see her tomorrer after the stage coach has left with it."

“I’ll tell her, pal,” says he with emotion, shaking my hand, so I headed for my cabin, feeling I had easily won the first battle in the campaign for Hannah Sprague’s hand. Imagine that pore sap Blaze throwing away a chance like that! I felt plumb sorry for him for being so addle-headed.

The sun was down by the time I got back to my cabin, and oncet I thought somebody was follering me, and I looked around, but it warn’t nobody but the feller I’d seen fishing, trudging along about a hundred yards behind me with his pole onto his shoulder.

Well, when I arriv’ at my cabin, I seen a furtive figger duck out the back way. It looked like old Polk, so I called to him, but he scooted off amongst the trees. I decided I must of been mistook, because likely old Polk was still off somewheres sulking on account of gitting shot in the britches. He was a onreasonable old cuss.

I went in and throwed the buckskin poke on the table and lit a candle, and jest then I heard a noise at the winder and wheeled quick jest in time to see somebody jerk his face away from the winder. I run to the door, and seen somebody sprinting off through the trees, and was jest fixing to take a shot at him when I recognized that old slouch hat. I wondered what that fool fisherman had follered me and looked in at my winder for, and I wondered why he run off so fast, but I’d already found out that Blue Lizard was full of idjits, so I give the matter no more thought. I ain’t one of these here fellers which wastes their time trying to figger out why things is like they is, and why people does things like they does. I got better employment for my spare time, sech as sleeping.

Satanta come up to the door and nickered, and I give him some oats, and then I built a fire in the fireplace and cooked some bacon and made some coffee, and I’d jest got through eating and cleaned up the pot and skillet when somebody hailed me outside.

I quick blowed out the candle and stepped to the door with a gun in each hand. I could see a tall figger standing in the starlight, so I ast who the devil he was and what he wanted.

“A friend of Old Man Sprague’s,” says he. “Huddleston is the name, my enormous young friend, Carius Z. Huddleston. Mister Sprague sent me over to help you guard his gold tonight.”

That didn't set well with me, because it looked like Old Man Sprague didn't think I was capable of taking care of it by myself, and I said so right out.

"Not at all," says Mister Huddleston. "He's so grateful to you for assumin' the responsibility that he said he couldn't endure it if you come to any harm on account of it, so he sent me to help you."

Well, that was all right. It looked like Old Man Sprague had took a fancy to me already, even before he'd saw me, and I felt that I was nigh as good as married to Hannah already. So I told Mr. Huddleston to come in, and I lit the candle and shet the door. He was a tall man with the biggest black mustache I ever seen, and he had on a frock tail coat and a broad-brim hat. I seen two ivory-handled six-shooters under his coattails. His eyes kind of bulged in the candlelight when he seen the big poke on the table and he ast me was that the gold and I said yes. So he hauled out a bottle of whiskey and said: "Well, my gigantic young friend, le's drink to Old Man Sprague's gold, may it arrive at its proper destination."

So we had a drink and I sot down on the bench and he sot on a rawhide bottomed chair, and he got to telling me stories, and he knowed more things about more people than I ever seen. He told me about a feller named Paul Revere which thrived during the Revolution when we licked the Britishers, and I got all het up hearing about him. He said the Britishers was going to sneak out of a town named Boston which I jedge must of been a right sizable cowtown or mining camp or something, and was going to fall on the people unawares and confiscate their stills and weppins and steers and things, but one of Paul's friends signaled him what was going on by swinging a lantern, and Paul forked his cayuse and fogged it down the trail to warn the folks.

When he was telling about Paul's friend signaling him Mister Huddleston got so excited he grabbed the candle and went over to the west winder and waved the candle back and forth three times to show me how it was done. It was a grand story, Wash, and I got goose bumps on me jest listening to it.

Well, it was gitting late by now, and Mister Huddleston ast me if I warn't sleepy. I said no, and he said: "Go ahead and lay down and sleep. I'll stand guard the rest of the night."

"Shucks," I said. "I ain't sleepy. You git some rest."

"We'll throw dice to see who sleeps first," says he, hauling out a pair, but I says: "No, sir! It's my job. I'm settin' up with the gold. You go on and lay down on that bunk over there if you wanta."

Well, for a minute Mister Huddleston got a most pecooliar expression onto his face, or it might of been the way the candlelight shined on it, because for a minute he looked jest like I've seen men look who was ready to pull out their pistol on me. Then he says: "All right. I believe I will take a snooze. You might as well kill the rest of that whisky. I got all I want."

So he went over to the bunk which was in a corner where the light didn't shine into very good, and he sot down on it to take off his boots. But he'd no sooner sot than he give a arful yell and bounded convulsively out into the middle of the room, clutching at his rear, and I seen a b'ar trap hanging onto the seat of his britches! I instantly knowed old Polk had sot it in the bunk for me, the revengeful old polecat.

From the way Mr. Huddleston was hollering I knowed it warn't only pants which was nipped betwixt the jaws; they was quite a chunk of Mister Huddleston betwixt 'em too. He went prancing around the cabin like one of them whirling derfishes and his langwidge was plumb terrible.

"Git it off, blast you!" he howled, but he was circling the room at sech speed I couldn't ketch him, so I grabbed the chain which dangled from the trap and give a heave and tore it loose from him by main strength. The seat of his pants and several freckles come with it, and the howls he'd let out previous warn't a circumstance to the one which he emitted now, also bounding about seven foot in the air besides.

"You –!" screamed he, and I likewise give a beller of amazement because his mustash had come off and revealed a familiar face!

“Witherington T. Jones!” I roared, dumfounded. “What the devil you doin’ here in disguise?”

“Now!” says he, pulling a gun. “Hands up, curse you, or –”

I knocked the gun out of his hand before he could pull the trigger, and I was so overcome with resentment that I taken him by the neck and shaken him till his spurs flew off.

“Is this any way to treat a man as risked his repertation to rescue you from bloodhounds?” I inquired with passion. “Where’s my mule, you ornery polecat?”

I had forgot about his other gun, but he hadn’t. But I was shaking him so energetic that somehow he missed me even when he had the muzzle almost agen my belly. The bullet tore the hide over my ribs and the powder burnt me so severe that I lost my temper.

“So you tries to murder me after obtainin’ my mule under false pretenses!” I bellered, taking the gun away from him and impulsively slinging him acrost the cabin. “You ain’t no friend of Old Man Sprague’s.”

At this moment he got hold of a butcher knife I used to slice bacon with and come at me, yelling: “Slim! Mike! Arizona! Jackson! Where’n hell air you?”

I taken the blade in my arm-muscles and then grabbed him and we was rassling all over the place when six men come storming through the door with guns in their hands. One of them yelled: “I thought you said you’d wait till he was asleep or drunk before you signaled us!”

“He wouldn’t go to sleep!” howled Mister Jones, spitting out a piece of my ear he’d bit off. “Dammit, do somethin’! Don’t you see he’s klllin’ me?”

But we was so tangled up they couldn’t shoot me without hitting him, so they clubbed their pistols and come for me, so I swung Mister Jones off his feet and throwed him at ’em. They was all in a bunch and he hit ’em broadside and knocked ’em all over and they crashed into the table and upsot it and the candle went out. The next minute they was a arful commotion going on as they started fighting each other in the dark, each one thinking it was me he had holt of.

I was feeling for 'em when the back door busted open and I had a brief glimpse of a tall figger darting out, and it was carrying something on its shoulder. Then I remembered that the poke had been on that table. Mister Jones had got holt of the gold and was skedaddling with it!

I run out of the back door after him jest as a mob of men come whooping and yelling up to the front door with torches and guns and ropes. I heard one of 'em yell: "Somebody's fightin' in there! Listen at 'em!"

Somebody else yelled: "Maybe the whole gang's in there with the hill-billy! Git 'em!" So they went smashing into the cabin jest as I run in amongst the trees after Mister Jones.

And there I was stumped. I couldn't see where he went and it was too dark to find his trail. Then all to oncet I heard Satanta squeal and a man yelled for help, and they come a crash like a man makes when a hoss bucks him off into a blackjack thicket. I run in the direction of the noise and by the starlight I seen Satanta grazing and a pair of human laigs sticking out of the bresh. Mister Jones had tried to git away on Satanta.

"I told you he wouldn't let nobody but me ride him," I says as I hauled him out, but his langwidge ain't fit to be repeated. The poke was lying clost by, busted open. When I picked it up, it didn't look right. I struck a match and looked.

That there poke was full of nothing but scrap iron!

I was so stunned I didn't hardly know what I was doing when I taken the poke in one hand and Mister Jones' neck in the other'n, and lugged 'em back to the cabin. The mob had Mister Jones's six men outside tied up, and was wiping the blood off 'em, and I seen Shorty and Black-Beard and Squint-Eye and the others, and about a hundred more.

"They're Stirling's men all right," says Warts. "But where's Mustang, and that hill-billy? Anyway, le's string these up right here."

“You ain’t,” says Black-Beard. “You all elected me sheriff before we come up here, and I aims to uphold the law … Who’s that?”

“It’s Old Man Sprague,” says somebody, as a bald-headed old coot come prancing through the crowd waving a shotgun.

“What you want?” says Black-Beard. “Don’t you see we’re busy?”

“I demands jestice!” I howled Old Man Sprague. “I been abused!”

At this moment I shouldered through the crowd with a heavy heart, and slang the poke of scrap iron down in front of him.

“There it is,” I says, “and I’ll swear it ain’t been monkeyed with since Blaze Wellington gave it to me!”

“Who’s that?’ howled Sprague.

“The hill-billy!” howled the mob. “Grab him!”

“No, you don’t!” I roared, drawing a gun. “I’ve took enough offa you Blue Lizard jackasses! I’m a honest man, and I’ve brung back Mister Jones to prove it.”

I then flang him down in front of them, and Warts give a howl and pounced on him. “Jones, nothing!” he yelled. “That’s Mustang Stirling!”

“I confesses,” says Mustang groggily. “Lock me up where I can be safe from that hill-billy! The critter ain’t human.”

“Somebody listen to me!” howled Old Man Sprague, jumping up and down. “I demands to be heard!”

“I done the best I could!” I roared, plumb out of patience. “When Blaze Wellington give me yore gold to guard –”

“What the devil air you talkin’ about?” he squalled. “That wuthless scoundrel never had no gold of mine.”

“What!” I hollered, going slightly crazy. Jest then I seen a feller in the crowd I recognized. I made a jump and grabbed him.

“Branner!” I roared. “You was at Wellington’s shack when he give me that poke! You tell me quick what this is all about, or –”

“Leggo!” he gasped. “It warn’t Sprague’s gold we hid. It was our’n. We couldn’t git it outa camp because we knowed Stirling’s spies was watchin’ us all the time. When you jumped Blaze in the Belle of New York, he seen a chance to git ’em off our necks. He filled that poke with scrap iron and give it to you where the spy could see it and hear what was said. The spy didn’t know whether it was our

gold or Sprague's, but we knowed if he thought you had it, Stirling would go after you and let us alone. He did, too, and that give Blaze a chance to sneak out early tonight with it."

"And that ain't all!" bellered Old Man Sprague. *"He taken Hannah with him! They've eloped!"*

My yell of mortal agony drownded out his demands for the sheriff to pursue 'em. Hannah! Eloped! It was too much for a critter to endure!

"Aw, don't you keer, partner," says Shorty, slapping me on the back with the arm I hadn't busted. "You been vindicated as a honest citizen! You're the hero of the hour!"

"Spare yore praise," I says bitterly. "I'm the victim of female perfidy. I have lost my faith in my feller man and my honest heart is busted all to perdition! Leave me to my sorrer!"

So they gathered up their prisoners and went away in awed silence. I am a rooint man. All I want to do is to become a hermit and forgit my aching heart in the untrodden wilderness.

Your pore brother,

PIKE

P. S. – The Next Morning. I have jest learnt that after I withdrawed from the campaign and left Antioch, you come out for sheriff and got elected. So that's why you persuaded me to come up here. I am heading for Antioch and when I git there I am going to whup you within a inch of yore wuthless life, I don't care if you air sheriff of Antioch. I am going to kick the seat of yore britches up around yore neck and sweep the streets with you till you don't know whether yo're setting or standing. Hoping this finds you in good health and spirits, I am,

Yore affectionate brother,

P. BEARFIELD ESQUIRE.

OceanofPDF.com

The Grim Land

From Sonora to Del Rio is a hundred barren miles
Where the sotol weave and shimmer in the sun –
Like a horde of rearing serpents swaying down the bare defiles
When the scarlet, silver webs of dawn are spun.

There are little 'dobe ranchos brooding far along the sky,
On the sullen dreary bosoms of the hills;
Not a wolf to break the quiet, not a desert bird to fly
Where the silence is so utter that it thrills.

With an eery sense of vastness, with a curious sense of age,
And the ghosts of eons gone uprear and glide
Like a horde of drifting shadows gleaming through the wilted sage –
They are riding where of old they used to ride.

Muleteer and caballero, with their plunder and their slaves –
Oh, the clink of ghostly stirrups in the morn!
Oh, the soundless flying clatter of the feathered, painted braves,
Oh, the echo of the spur and hoof and horn.

Maybe, in the heat of evening, comes a wind from Mexico
Laden with the heat of seven Hells,
And the rattlers in the yucca and the buzzard dark and slow
Hear and understand the grisly tales it tells.

Gaunt and stark and bare and mocking rise the everlasting cliffs
Like a row of sullen giants hewn of stone,
Till the traveler, mazed with silence, thinks to look on hieroglyphs,
Thinks to see a carven Pharaoh on his throne.

Once these sullen hills were beaches and they saw the ocean flee
In the misty ages never known of men,
And they wait in brooding silence till the everlasting sea
Comes foaming forth to claim her own again.

OceanofPDF.com

Pigeons from Hell

I

The Whistler in the Dark

Griswell awoke suddenly, every nerve tingling with a premonition of imminent peril. He stared about wildly, unable at first to remember where he was, or what he was doing there. Moonlight filtered in through the dusty windows, and the great empty room with its lofty ceiling and gaping black fireplace was spectral and unfamiliar. Then as he emerged from the clinging cobwebs of his recent sleep, he remembered where he was and how he came to be there. He twisted his head and stared at his companion, sleeping on the floor near him. John Branner was but a vaguely bulking shape in the darkness that the moon scarcely grayed.

Griswell tried to remember what had awakened him. There was no sound in the house, no sound outside except the mournful hoot of an owl, far away in the piny woods. Now he had captured the illusive memory. It was a dream, a nightmare so filled with dim terror that it had frightened him awake. Recollection flooded back, vividly etching the abominable vision.

Or was it a dream? Certainly it must have been, but it had blended so curiously with recent actual events that it was difficult to know where reality left off and fantasy began.

Dreaming, he had seemed to relive his past few waking hours, in accurate detail. The dream had begun, abruptly, as he and John Branner came in sight of the house where they now lay. They had come rattling and bouncing over the stumpy, uneven old road that led through the pinelands, he and John Branner, wandering far afield from their New England home, in search of vacation pleasure. They had sighted the old house with its balustraded galleries rising amidst a wilderness of weeds and bushes, just as the sun was setting behind it. It dominated their fancy, rearing black and stark and gaunt against the low lurid rampart of sunset, barred by the black pines.

They were tired, sick of bumping and pounding all day over woodland roads. The old deserted house stimulated their imagination with its suggestion of antebellum splendor and ultimate decay. They left the automobile beside the rutty road, and as they went up the winding walk of crumbling bricks, almost lost in the tangle of rank growth, pigeons rose from the balustrades in a fluttering, feathery crowd and swept away with a low thunder of beating wings.

The oaken door sagged on broken hinges. Dust lay thick on the floor of the wide, dim hallway, on the broad steps of the stair that mounted up from the hall. They turned into a door opposite the landing, and entered a large room, empty, dusty, with cobwebs shining thickly in the corners. Dust lay thick over the ashes in the great fireplace.

They discussed gathering wood and building a fire, but decided against it. As the sun sank, darkness came quickly, the thick, black, absolute darkness of the pinelands. They knew that rattlesnakes and copperheads haunted Southern forests, and they did not care to go groping for firewood in the dark. They ate frugally from tins, then rolled in their blankets fully clad before the empty fireplace, and went instantly to sleep.

This, in part, was what Griswell had dreamed. He saw again the gaunt house looming stark against the crimson sunset; saw the flight of the pigeons as he and Branner came up the shattered walk. He saw the dim room in which they presently lay, and he saw the two forms that were himself and his companion, lying wrapped in their blankets on the dusty floor. Then from that point his dream altered subtly, passed out of the realm of the commonplace and became tinged with fear. He was looking into a vague, shadowy chamber, lit by the gray light of the moon which streamed in from some obscure source. For there was no window in that room. But in the gray light he saw three silent shapes that hung suspended in a row, and their stillness and their outlines woke chill horror in his soul. There was no sound, no word, but he sensed a Presence of fear and lunacy crouching in a dark corner.… Abruptly he was back in the dusty, high-ceilinged room, before the great fireplace.

———

He was lying in his blankets, staring tensely through the dim door and across the shadowy hall, to where a beam of moonlight fell across the balustraded stair, some seven steps up from the landing. And there was something on the stair, a bent, misshapen, shadowy thing that never moved fully into the beam of light. But a dim yellow blur that might have been a face was turned toward him, as if *something* crouched on the stair, regarding him and his companion. Fright crept chilly through his veins, and it was then that he awoke – if indeed he had been asleep.

He blinked his eyes. The beam of moonlight fell across the stair just as he had dreamed it did; but no figure lurked there. Yet his flesh still crawled from the fear the dream or vision had roused in him; his legs felt as if they had been plunged in ice-water. He made an involuntary movement to awaken his companion, when a sudden sound paralyzed him.

It was the sound of whistling on the floor above. Eery and sweet it rose, not carrying any tune, but piping shrill and melodious. Such a sound in a supposedly deserted house was alarming enough; but it was more than the fear of a physical invader that held Griswell frozen. He could not himself have defined the horror that gripped him. But Branner's blankets rustled, and Griswell saw he was sitting upright. His figure bulked dimly in the soft darkness, the head turned toward the stair as if the man were listening intently. More sweetly and more subtly evil rose that weird whistling.

"John!" whispered Griswell from dry lips. He had meant to shout – to tell Branner that there was somebody upstairs, somebody who could mean them no good; that they must leave the house at once. But his voice died dryly in his throat.

Branner had risen. His boots clumped on the floor as he moved toward the door. He stalked leisurely into the hall and made for the lower landing, merging with the shadows that clustered black about the stair.

Griswell lay incapable of movement, his mind a whirl of bewilderment. Who was that whistling upstairs? Why was Branner going up the stairs? Griswell saw him pass the spot where the moonlight rested, saw his head tilted back as if he were looking at something Griswell could not see, above and beyond the stair. But his face was like that of a sleepwalker. He moved across the bar of moonlight and vanished from Griswell's view, even as the latter tried to shout to him to come back. A ghastly whisper was the only result of his effort.

The whistling sank to a lower note, died out. Griswell heard the stairs creaking under Branner's measured tread. Now he had reached the hallway above, for Griswell heard the clump of his feet moving along it. Suddenly the footfalls halted, and the whole night seemed to hold its breath. Then an awful scream split the stillness, and Griswell started up, echoing the cry.

The strange paralysis that had held him was broken. He took a step toward the door, then checked himself. The footfalls were resumed. Branner was coming back. He was not running. The tread was even more deliberate and measured than before. Now the stairs began to creak again. A groping hand, moving along the balustrade, came into the bar of moonlight; then another, and a ghastly thrill went through Griswell as he saw that the other hand gripped a hatchet – a hatchet which dripped blackly. *Was* that Branner who was coming down that stair?

Yes! The figure had moved into the bar of moonlight now, and Griswell recognized it. Then he saw Branner's face, and a shriek burst from Griswell's lips. Branner's face was bloodless, corpse-like; gouts of blood dripped darkly down it; his eyes were glassy and set, and blood oozed from the great gash *which cleft the crown of his head!*

Griswell never remembered exactly how he got out of that accursed house. Afterward he retained a mad, confused impression of smashing his way through a dusty cobwebbed window, of stumbling blindly across the weed-choked lawn, gibbering his frantic horror.

He saw the black wall of the pines, and the moon floating in a blood-red mist in which there was neither sanity nor reason.

Some shred of sanity returned to him as he saw the automobile beside the road. In a world gone suddenly mad, that was an object reflecting prosaic reality; but even as he reached for the door, a dry chilling whir sounded in his ears, and he recoiled from the swaying undulating shape that arched up from its scaly coils on the driver's seat and hissed sibilantly at him, darting a forked tongue in the moonlight.

With a sob of horror he turned and fled down the road, as a man runs in a nightmare. He ran without purpose or reason. His numbed brain was incapable of conscious thought. He merely obeyed the blind primitive urge to run – run – run until he fell exhausted.

The black walls of the pines flowed endlessly past him; so he was seized with the illusion that he was getting nowhere. But presently a sound penetrated the fog of his terror – the steady, inexorable patter of feet behind him. Turning his head, he saw *something* loping after him – wolf or dog, he could not tell which, but its eyes glowed like balls of green fire. With a gasp he increased his speed, reeled around a bend in the road, and heard a horse snort; saw it rear and heard its rider curse; saw the gleam of blue steel in the man's lifted hand.

He staggered and fell, catching at the rider's stirrup.

"For God's sake, help me!" he panted. "The thing! It killed Branner – it's coming after me! *Look!"*

Twin balls of fire gleamed in the fringe of bushes at the turn of the road. The rider swore again, and on the heels of his profanity came the smashing report of his six-shooter – again and yet again. The fire-sparks vanished, and the rider, jerking his stirrup free from Griswell's grasp, spurred his horse at the bend. Griswell staggered up, shaking in every limb. The rider was out of sight only a moment; then he came galloping back.

"Took to the brush. Timber wolf, I reckon, though I never heard of one chasin' a man before. Do you know what it was?"

Griswell could only shake his head weakly.

The rider, etched in the moonlight, looked down at him, smoking pistol still lifted in his right hand. He was a compactly-built man of medium height, and his broad-brimmed planter's hat and his boots marked him as a native of the country as definitely as Griswell's garb stamped him as a stranger.

"What's all this about, anyway?"

"I don't know," Griswell answered helplessly. "My name's Griswell. John Branner – my friend who was travelling with me – we stopped at a deserted house back down the road to spend the night. Something –" at the memory he was choked by a rush of horror. "My God!" he screamed. "I must be mad! *Something* came and looked over the balustrade of the stair – something with a yellow face! I thought I dreamed it, but it must have been real. Then somebody began whistling upstairs, and Branner rose and went up the stairs walking like a man in his sleep, or hypnotized. I heard him scream – or someone screamed; then he came down the stair again with a bloody hatchet in his hand – and my God, sir, he was *dead!* His head had been split open. I saw brains and clotted blood oozing down his face, and his face was that of a dead man. *But he came down the stair!* As God is my witness, John Branner was murdered in that dark upper hallway, and then his dead body came stalking down the stairs with a hatchet in its hand – to kill me!"

The rider made no reply; he sat his horse like a statue, outlined against the stars, and Griswell could not read his expression, his face shadowed by his hat-brim.

"You think I'm mad," he said hopelessly. "Perhaps I am."

"I don't know what to think," answered the rider. "If it was any house but the old Blassenville Manor – well, we'll see. My name's Buckner. I'm sheriff of this country. Took a nigger over to the county seat in the next county and was ridin' back late."

He swung off his horse and stood beside Griswell, shorter than the lanky New Englander, but much harder knit. There was a natural manner of decision and certainty about him, and it was easy to believe that he would be a dangerous man in any sort of a fight.

"Are you afraid to go back to the house?" he asked, and Griswell shuddered, but shook his head, the dogged tenacity of Puritan

ancestors asserting itself.

“The thought of facing that horror again turns me sick. But poor Branner –” he choked again. “We must find his body. My God!” he cried, unmanned by the abysmal horror of the thing; *“what* will we find? If a dead man walks, what –”

“We’ll see.” The sheriff caught the reins in the crook of his left elbow and began filling the empty chambers of his big blue pistol as they walked along.

As they made the turn Griswell’s blood was ice at the thought of what they might see lumbering up the road with bloody, grinning death-mask, but they saw only the house looming spectrally among the pines, down the road. A strong shudder shook Griswell.

“God, how *evil* that house looks, against those black pines! It looked sinister from the very first – when we went up the broken walk and saw those pigeons fly up from the porch –”

“Pigeons?” Buckner cast him a quick glance. “You saw the pigeons?”

“Why, yes! Scores of them perching on the porch railing.”

They strode on for a moment in silence, before Buckner said abruptly: “I’ve lived in this country all my life. I’ve passed the old Blassenville place a thousand times, I reckon, at all hours of the day and night. But I never saw a pigeon anywhere around it, or anywhere else in these woods.”

“There were scores of them,” repeated Griswell, bewildered.

“I’ve seen men who swore they’d seen a flock of pigeons perched along the balusters just at sundown,” said Buckner slowly. “Niggers, all of them except one man. A tramp. He was buildin’ a fire in the yard, aimin’ to camp there that night. I passed along there about dark, and he told me about the pigeons. I came back by there the next mornin’. The ashes of his fire were there, and his tin cup, and skillet where he’d fried pork, and his blankets looked like they’d been slept in. Nobody ever saw him again. That was twelve years ago. The niggers say they can see the pigeons, but no nigger would pass along this road between sundown and sun-up. They say the pigeons are the souls of the Blassenvilles, let out of hell at sunset. The niggers say the red glare in the west is the light from hell, because then the gates of hell are open, and the Blassenvilles fly out.”

“Who were the Blassenvilles?” asked Griswell, shivering.

“They owned all this land here. French-English family. Came here from the West Indies before the Louisiana Purchase. The Civil War

ruined them, like it did so many. Some were killed in the War; most of the others died out. Nobody's lived in the Manor since 1890 when Miss Elizabeth Blassenville, the last of the line, fled from the old house one night like it was a plague spot, and never came back to it – this your auto?"

They halted beside the car, and Griswell stared morbidly at the grim house. Its dusty panes were empty and blank; but they did not seem blind to him. It seemed to him that ghastly eyes were fixed hungrily on him through those darkened panes. Buckner repeated his question.

"Yes. Be careful. There's a snake on the seat – or there was."

"Not there now," grunted Buckner, tying his horse and pulling an electric torch out of the saddle-bag. "Well, let's have a look."

He strode up the broken brick-walk as matter-of-factly as if he were paying a social call on friends. Griswell followed close at his heels, his heart pounding suffocatingly. A scent of decay and moldering vegetation blew on the faint wind, and Griswell grew faint with nausea, that rose from a frantic abhorrence of these black woods, these ancient plantation houses that hid forgotten secrets of slavery and bloody pride and mysterious intrigues. He had thought of the South as a sunny, lazy land washed by soft breezes laden with spice and warm blossoms, where life ran tranquilly to the rhythm of black folk singing in sun-bathed cottonfields. But now he had discovered another, unsuspected side – a dark, brooding, fear-haunted side, and the discovery repelled him.

The oaken door sagged as it had before. The blackness of the interior was intensified by the beam of Buckner's light playing on the sill. That beam sliced through the darkness of the hallway and roved up the stair, and Griswell held his breath, clenching his fists. But no shape of lunacy leered down at them. Buckner went in, walking light as a cat, torch in one hand, gun in the other.

As he swung his light into the room across from the stairway, Griswell cried out – and cried out again, almost fainting with the intolerable sickness at what he saw. A trail of blood drops led across the floor, crossing the blankets Branner had occupied, which lay between the door and those in which Griswell had lain. And

Griswell's blankets had a terrible occupant. John Branner lay there, face down, his cleft head revealed in merciless clarity in the steady light. His outstretched hand still gripped the haft of a hatchet, and the blade was imbedded deep in the blanket and the floor beneath, just where Griswell's head had lain when he slept there.

A momentary rush of blackness engulfed Griswell. He was not aware that he staggered, or that Buckner caught him. When he could see and hear again, he was violently sick and hung his head against the mantel, retching miserably.

Buckner turned the light full on him, making him blink. Buckner's voice came from behind the blinding radiance, the man himself unseen.

"Griswell, you've told me a yarn that's hard to believe. I saw something chasin' you, but it might have been a timber wolf, or a mad dog.

"If you're holdin' back anything, you better spill it. What you told me won't hold up in any court. You're bound to be accused of killin' your partner. I'll have to arrest you. If you'll give me the straight goods now, it'll make it easier. Now, didn't you kill this fellow, Branner?

"Wasn't it something like this: you quarreled, he grabbed a hatchet and swung at you, but you dodged and then let *him* have it?"

Griswell sank down and hid his face in his hands, his head swimming.

"Great God, man, I didn't murder John! Why, we've been friends ever since we were children in school together. I've told you the truth. I don't blame you for not believing me. But God help me, it is the truth!"

The light swung back to the gory head again, and Griswell closed his eyes.

He heard Buckner grunt.

"I believe this hatchet in his hand is the one he was killed with. Blood and brains plastered on the blade, and hairs stickin' to it –

hairs exactly the same color as his. This makes it tough for you, Griswell."

"How so?" the New Englander asked dully.

"Knock any plea of self-defense in the head. Branner couldn't have swung at you with this hatchet after you split his skull with it. You must have pulled the ax out of his head, stuck it into the floor and clamped his fingers on it to make it look like he'd attacked you. And it would have been damned clever – if you'd used another hatchet."

"But I didn't kill him," groaned Griswell. "I have no intention of pleading self-defense."

"That's what puzzles me," Buckner admitted frankly, straightening. "What murderer would rig up such a crazy story as you've told me, to prove his innocence? Average killer would have told a logical yarn, at least. Hmmm! Blood drops leadin' from the door. The body was dragged – no, couldn't have been dragged. The floor isn't smeared. You must have carried it here, after killin' him in some other place. But in that case, why isn't there any blood on your clothes? Of course you could have changed clothes and washed your hands. But the fellow hasn't been dead long."

"He walked downstairs and across the room," said Griswell hopelessly. "He came to kill me. I knew he was coming to kill me when I saw him lurching down the stair. He struck where I would have been, if I hadn't awakened. That window – I burst out at it. You see it's broken."

"I see. But if he walked then, why isn't he walkin' now?"

"I don't know! I'm too sick to think straight. I've been fearing that he'd rise up from the floor where he lies and come at me again. When I heard that wolf running up the road after me, I thought it was John chasing me – John, running through the night with his bloody ax and his bloody head, and his death-grin!"

His teeth chattered as he lived that horror over again. Buckner let his light play across the floor.

"The blood drops lead into the hall. Come on. We'll follow them." Griswell cringed. "They lead upstairs." Buckner's eyes were fixed hard on him. "Are you afraid to go upstairs, with me?" Griswell's face was gray.

“Yes. But I’m going, with you or without you. The thing that killed poor John may still be hiding up there.”

“Stay behind me,” ordered Buckner. “If anything jumps us, I’ll take care of it. But for your own sake, I warn you that I shoot quicker than a cat jumps, and I don’t often miss. If you’ve got any ideas of layin’ me out from behind, forget them.”

“Don’t be a fool!” Resentment got the better of his apprehension, and this outburst seemed to reassure Buckner more than any of his protestations of innocence.

“I want to be fair,” he said quietly. “I haven’t indicted and condemned you in my mind already. If only half of what you’re tellin’ me is the truth, you’ve been through a hell of an experience, and I don’t want to be too hard on you. But you can see how hard it is for me to believe all you’ve told me.”

Griswell wearily motioned for him to lead the way, unspeaking. They went out into the hall, paused at the landing. A thin string of crimson drops, distinct in the thick dust, led up the steps.

“Man’s tracks in the dust,” grunted Buckner. “Go slow, I’ve got to be sure of what I see, because we’re obliteratin’ them as we go up. Hmmm! One set goin’ up, one comin’ down. Same man. Not your tracks. Branner was a bigger man than you are. Blood drops all the way – blood on the bannisters like a man had laid his bloody hand there – a smear of stuff that looks – *brains*. Now what –”

“He walked down the stair, a dead man,” shuddered Griswell. “Groping with one hand – the other gripping the hatchet that killed him.”

“Or was carried,” muttered the sheriff. “But if somebody carried him – *where are the tracks?”*

They came out into the upper hallway, a vast, empty space of dust and shadows where time-crusted windows repelled the moonlight and the ring of Buckner’s torch seemed inadequate. Griswell trembled like a leaf. Here, in the darkness and horror, John Branner had died.

“Somebody whistled up here,” he muttered. “John came, as if he were being called.”

Buckner’s eyes were blazing strangely in the light.

“The footprints lead down the hall,” he muttered. “Same as on the stair – one set going, one coming. Same prints – *Judas!*”

Behind him Griswell stifled a cry, for he had seen what prompted Buckner’s exclamation. A few feet from the head of the stair Branner’s footprints stopped abruptly, then returned, treading almost in the other tracks. And where the trail halted there was a great splash of blood on the dusty floor – and other tracks met it – tracks of bare feet, narrow but with splayed toes. They too receded in a second line from the spot.

Buckner bent over them, swearing.

“The tracks meet! And where they meet there’s blood and brains on the floor! Branner must have been killed on that spot – with a blow from a hatchet. Bare feet coming out of the darkness to meet shod feet – then both turned away again; the shod feet went downstairs, the bare feet went back down the hall.” He directed his light down the hall. The footprints faded into darkness, beyond the reach of the beam. On either hand the closed doors of chambers were cryptic portals of mystery.

“Suppose your crazy tale *was* true,” Buckner muttered, half to himself. “These aren’t your tracks. They look like a woman’s. Suppose somebody did whistle, and Branner went upstairs to investigate. Suppose somebody met him here in the dark and split his head. The signs and tracks would have been, in that case, just as they really are. But if that’s so, why isn’t Branner lyin’ here where he was killed? Could he have lived long enough to take the hatchet away from whoever killed him, and stagger downstairs with it?”

“No, no!” Recollection gagged Griswell. “I *saw* him on the stair. He was dead. No man could live a minute after receiving such a wound.”

“I believe it,” muttered Buckner. “But – it’s madness! Or else it’s *too* clever – yet, what sane man would think up and work out such an elaborate and utterly insane plan to escape punishment for murder, when a simple plea of self-defense would have been so

much more effective? No court would recognize that story. Well, let's follow these other tracks. They lead down the hall – here, what's this?"

With an icy clutch at his soul, Griswell saw the light was beginning to grow dim.

"This battery is new," muttered Buckner, and for the first time Griswell caught an edge of fear in his voice. "Come on – out of here quick!"

The light had faded to a faint red glow. The darkness seemed straining into them, creeping with black cat-feet. Buckner retreated, pushing Griswell stumbling behind him as he walked backward, pistol cocked and lifted, down the dark hall. In the growing darkness Griswell heard what sounded like the stealthy opening of a door. And suddenly the blackness about them was vibrant with menace. Griswell knew Buckner sensed it as well as he, for the sheriff's hard body was tense and taut as a stalking panther's.

But without haste he worked his way to the stair and backed down it, Griswell preceding him, and fighting the panic that urged him to scream and burst into mad flight. A ghastly thought brought icy sweat out on his flesh. *Suppose the dead man were creeping up the stair behind them in the dark, face frozen in the death-grin, blood-caked hatchet lifted to strike?*

This possibility so overpowered him that he was scarcely aware when his feet struck the level of the lower hallway, and he was only then aware that the light had grown brighter as they descended, until it now gleamed with its full power – but when Buckner turned it back up the stairway, it failed to illuminate the darkness that hung like a tangible fog at the head of the stair.

"The damn thing was conjured," muttered Buckner. "Nothin' else. It couldn't act like that naturally."

"Turn the light into the room," begged Griswell. "See if John – if John is –"

He could not put the ghastly thought into words, but Buckner understood.

He swung the beam around, and Griswell had never dreamed that the sight of the gory body of a murdered man could bring such

relief.

"He's still there," grunted Buckner. "If he walked after he was killed, he hasn't walked since. But that thing –"

Again he turned the light up the stair, and stood chewing his lip and scowling. Three times he half lifted his gun. Griswell read his mind. The sheriff was tempted to plunge back up that stair, take his chance with the unknown. But common sense held him back.

"I wouldn't have a chance in the dark," he muttered. "And I've got a hunch the light would go out again."

He turned and faced Griswell squarely.

"There's no use dodgin' the question. There's somethin' hellish in this house, and I believe I have an inklin' of what it is. I don't believe you killed Branner. Whatever killed him is up there – now. There's a lot about your yarn that don't sound sane; but there's nothin' sane about a flashlight goin' out like this one did. I don't believe that thing upstairs is human. I never met anything I was afraid to tackle in the dark before, but I'm not goin' up there until daylight. It's not long until dawn. We'll wait for it out there on that gallery."

The stars were already paling when they came out on the broad porch. Buckner seated himself on the balustrade, facing the door, his pistol dangling in his fingers. Griswell sat down near him and leaned back against a crumbling pillar. He shut his eyes, grateful for the faint breeze that seemed to cool his throbbing brain. He experienced a dull sense of unreality. He was a stranger in a strange land, a land that had become suddenly imbued with black horror. The shadow of the noose hovered above him, and in that dark house lay John Branner, with his butchered head – like the figments of a dream these facts spun and eddied in his brain until all merged in a gray twilight as sleep came uninvited to his weary soul.

He awoke to a cold white dawn and full memory of the horrors of the night. Mists curled about the stems of the pines, crawled in smoky wisps up the broken walk. Buckner was shaking him.

"Wake up! It's daylight."

Griswell rose, wincing at the stiffness of his limbs. His face was gray and old.

"I'm ready. Let's go upstairs."

"I've already been!" Buckner's eyes burned in the early dawn. "I didn't wake you up. I went as soon as it was light. I found nothin'."

"The tracks of the bare feet –"

"Gone!"

"Gone?"

"Yes, gone! The dust had been disturbed all over the hall, from the point where Branner's tracks ended; swept into corners. No chance of trackin' anything there now. Something obliterated those tracks while we sat here, and I didn't hear a sound. I've gone through the whole house. Not a sign of anything."

Griswell shuddered at the thought of himself sleeping alone on the porch while Buckner conducted his exploration.

"What shall we do?" he asked listlessly. "With those tracks gone, there goes my only chance of proving my story."

"We'll take Branner's body into the county seat," answered Buckner. "Let me do the talkin'. If the authorities knew the facts as they appear, they'd insist on you being confined and indicted. I don't believe you killed Branner – but neither a district attorney, judge nor jury would believe what you told me, or what happened to us last night. I'm handlin' this thing my own way. I'm not goin' to arrest you until I've exhausted every other possibility.

"Say nothin' about what's happened here, when we get to town. I'll simply tell the district attorney that John Branner was killed by a party or parties unknown, and that I'm workin' on the case.

"Are you game to come back with me to this house and spend the night here, sleepin' in that room as you and Branner slept last night?"

Griswell went white, but answered as stoutly as his ancestors might have expressed their determination to hold their cabins in the teeth of the Pequots: "I'll do it."

"Let's go then; help me pack the body out to your auto."

Griswell's soul revolted at the sight of John Branner's bloodless face in the chill white dawn, and the feel of his clammy flesh. The

gray fog wrapped wispy tentacles about their feet as they carried their grisly burden across the lawn.

II

The Snake's Brother

Again the shadows were lengthening over the pinelands, and again two men came bumping along the old road in a car with a New England license plate.

Buckner was driving. Griswell's nerves were too shattered for him to trust himself at the wheel. He looked gaunt and haggard, and his face was still pallid. The strain of the day spent at the county seat was added to the horror that still rode his soul like the shadow of a black-winged vulture. He had not slept, had not tasted what he had eaten.

"I told you I'd tell you about the Blassenvilles," said Buckner. "They were proud folks, haughty, and pretty damn ruthless when they wanted their way. They didn't treat their niggers as well as the other planters did – got their ideas in the West Indies, I reckon. There was a streak of cruelty in them – especially Miss Celia, the last one of the family to come to these parts. That was long after the slaves had been freed, but she used to whip her mulatto maid just like she was a slave, the old folks say … The niggers said when a Blassenville died, the devil was always waitin' for him out in the black pines.

"Well, after the Civil War they died off pretty fast, livin' in poverty on the plantation which was allowed to go to ruin. Finally only four girls were left, sisters, livin' in the old house and ekin' out a bare livin', with a few niggers livin' in the old slave huts and workin' the fields on the share. They kept to themselves, bein' proud, and ashamed of their poverty. Folks wouldn't see them for months at a time. When they needed supplies they sent a nigger to town after them.

"But folks knew about it when Miss Celia came to live with them. She came from somewhere in the West Indies, where the whole family originally had its roots – a fine, handsome woman, they say,

in the early thirties. But she didn't mix with folks any more than the girls did. She brought a mulatto maid with her, and the Blassenville cruelty cropped out in her treatment of this maid. I knew an old nigger, years ago, who swore he saw Miss Celia tie this girl up to a tree, stark naked, and whip her with a horsewhip. Nobody was surprized when she disappeared. Everybody figured she'd run away, of course.

"Well, one day in the spring of 1890 Miss Elizabeth, the youngest girl, came in to town for the first time in maybe a year. She came after supplies. Said the niggers had all left the place. Talked a little more, too, a bit wild. Said Miss Celia had gone, without leaving any word. Said her sisters thought she'd gone back to the West Indies, but she believed her aunt *was still in the house*. She didn't say what she meant. Just got her supplies and pulled out for the Manor.

"A month went past, and a nigger came into town and said that Miss Elizabeth was livin' at the Manor alone. Said her three sisters weren't there any more, that they'd left one by one without givin' any word or explanation. She didn't know where they'd gone, and was afraid to stay there alone, but didn't know where else to go. She'd never known anything but the Manor, and had neither relatives nor friends. But she was in mortal terror of *something*. The nigger said she locked herself in her room at night and kept candles burnin' all night.…

"It was a stormy spring night when Miss Elizabeth came tearin' into town on the one horse she owned, nearly dead from fright. She fell from her horse in the square; when she could talk she said she'd found a secret room in the Manor that had been forgotten for a hundred years. And she said that there she found her three sisters, dead, and hangin' by their necks from the ceilin'. She said *something* chased her and nearly brained her with an ax as she ran out the front door, but somehow she got to the horse and got away. She was nearly crazy with fear, and didn't know what it was that chased her – said it looked like a woman with a yellow face.

"About a hundred men rode out there, right away. They searched the house from top to bottom, but they didn't find any secret room, or the remains of the sisters. But they did find a hatchet stickin' in

the doorjamb downstairs, with some of Miss Elizabeth's hairs stuck on it, just as she'd said. She wouldn't go back there and show them how to find the secret door; almost went crazy when they suggested it.

"When she was able to travel, the people made up some money and loaned it to her – she was still too proud to accept charity – and she went to California. She never came back, but later it was learned, when she sent back to repay the money they'd loaned her, that she'd married out there.

"Nobody ever bought the house. It stood there just as she'd left it, and as the years passed folks stole all the furnishings out of it, poor white trash, I reckon. A nigger wouldn't go about it. But they came after sun-up and left long before sundown."

"What did the people think about Miss Elizabeth's story?" asked Griswell.

"Well, most folks thought she'd gone a little crazy, livin' in that old house alone. But some people believed that mulatto girl, Joan, didn't run away, after all. They believed she'd hidden in the woods, and glutted her hatred of the Blassenvilles by murderin' Miss Celia and the three girls. They beat up the woods with bloodhounds, but never found a trace of her. If there was a secret room in the house, she might have been hidin' there – if there was anything to that theory."

"She couldn't have been hiding there all these years," muttered Griswell. "Anyway, the thing in the house now isn't human."

Buckner wrenched the wheel around and turned into a dim trace that left the main road and meandered off through the pines.

"Where are you going?"

"There's an old nigger that lives off this way a few miles. I want to talk to him. We're up against something that takes more than white man's sense. The black people know more than we do about some things. This old man is nearly a hundred years old. His master educated him when he was a boy, and after he was freed he traveled

more extensively than most white men do. They say he's a voodoo man."

Griswell shivered at the phrase, staring uneasily at the green forest walls that shut them in. The scent of the pines was mingled with the odors of unfamiliar plants and blossoms. But underlying all was a reek of rot and decay. Again a sick abhorrence of these dark mysterious woodlands almost overpowered him.

"Voodoo!" he muttered. "I'd forgotten about that – I never could think of black magic in connection with the South. To me witchcraft was always associated with old crooked streets in waterfront towns, overhung by gabled roofs that were old when they were hanging witches in Salem; dark musty alleys where black cats and other things might steal at night. Witchcraft always meant the old towns of New England, to me – but all this is more terrible than any New England legend – these somber pines, old deserted houses, lost plantations, mysterious black people, old tales of madness and horror – God, what frightful, ancient terrors there are on this continent fools call 'young'!"

"Here's old Jacob's hut," announced Buckner, bringing the automobile to a halt.

Griswell saw a clearing and a small cabin squatting under the shadows of the huge trees. There pines gave way to oaks and cypresses, bearded with gray trailing moss, and behind the cabin lay the edge of a swamp that ran away under the dimness of the trees, choked with rank vegetation. A thin wisp of blue smoke curled up from the stick-and-mud chimney.

He followed Buckner to the tiny stoop, where the sheriff pushed open the leather-hinged door and strode in. Griswell blinked in the comparative dimness of the interior. A single small window let in a little daylight. An old negro crouched beside the hearth, watching a pot stew over the open fire. He looked up as they entered, but did not rise. He seemed incredibly old. His face was a mass of wrinkles, and his eyes, dark and vital, were filmed momentarily at times as if his mind wandered.

Buckner motioned Griswell to sit down in a string-bottomed chair, and himself took a rudely-made bench near the hearth, facing the

old man.

“Jacob,” he said bluntly, “the time’s come for you to talk. I know you know the secret of Blassenville Manor. I’ve never questioned you about it, because it wasn’t in my line. But a man was murdered there last night, and this man here may hang for it, unless you tell me what haunts that old house of the Blassenvilles.”

The old man’s eyes gleamed, then grew misty as if clouds of extreme age drifted across his brittle mind.

“The Blassenvilles,” he murmured, and his voice was mellow and rich, his speech not the patois of the piny woods darky. “They were proud people, sirs – proud and cruel. Some died in the war, some were killed in duels – the men-folks, sirs. Some died in the Manor – the old Manor –” His voice trailed off into unintelligible mumblings.

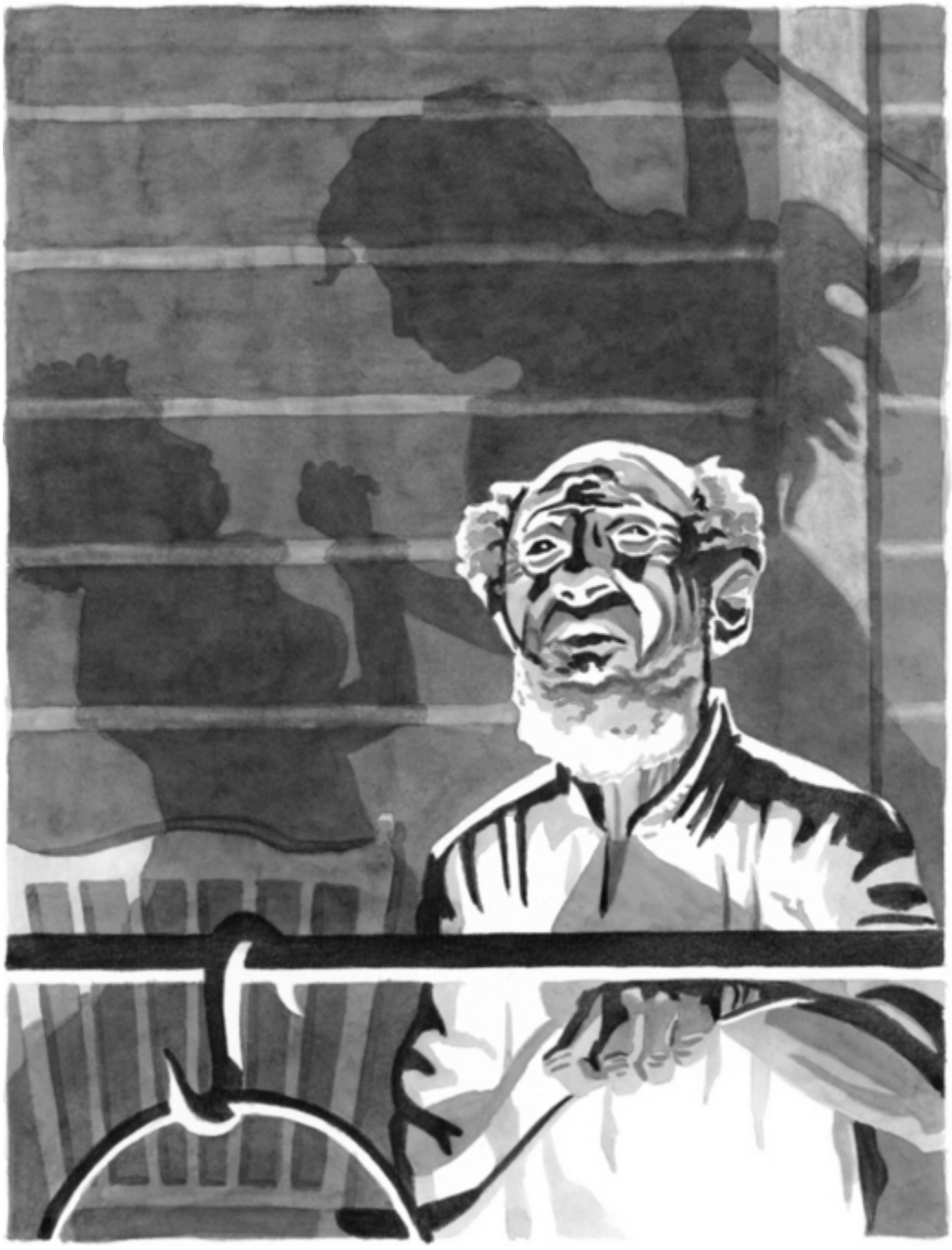
“What of the Manor?” asked Buckner patiently.

“Miss Celia was the proudest of them all,” the old man muttered. “The proudest and the cruelest. The black people hated her; Joan most of all. Joan had white blood in her, and she was proud, too. Miss Celia whipped her like a slave.”

“What is the secret of Blassenville Manor?” persisted Buckner.

The film faded from the old man’s eyes; they were dark as moonlit wells.

“What secret, sir? I do not understand.”



“Yes, you do. For years that old house has stood there with its mystery. You know the key to its riddle.”

The old man stirred the stew. He seemed perfectly rational now.

“Sir, life is sweet, even to an old black man.”

“You mean somebody would kill you if you told me?”

But the old man was mumbling again, his eyes clouded.

"Not somebody. No human. No human being. The black gods of the swamps. My secret is inviolate, guarded by the Big Serpent, the god above all gods. He would send a little brother to kiss me with his cold lips – a little brother with a white crescent moon on his head. I sold my soul to the Big Serpent when he made me maker of *zuvembies*–"

Buckner stiffened.

"I heard that word once before," he said softly, "from the lips of a dying black man, when I was a child. What does it mean?"

Fear filled the eyes of old Jacob.

"What have I said? No – no! I said nothing!"

"Zuvembies," prompted Buckner.

"Zuvembies," mechanically repeated the old man, his eyes vacant. "A *zuvembie* was once a woman – on the Slave Coast they know of them. The drums that whisper by night in the hills of Haiti tell of them. The makers of *zuvembies* are honored of the people of Damballah. It is death to speak of it to a white man – it is one of the Snake God's forbidden secrets."

"You speak of the *zuvembies,"* said Buckner softly.

"I must not speak of it," mumbled the old man, and Griswell realized that he was thinking aloud, too far gone in his dotage to be aware that he was speaking at all. "No white man must know that I danced in the Black Ceremony of the voodoo, and was made a maker of *zombies* and *zuvembies*. The Big Snake punishes loose tongues with death."

"A *zuvembie* is a woman?" prompted Buckner.

"Was a woman," the old Negro muttered. *"She* knew I was a maker of *zuvembies* – she came and stood in my hut and asked for the awful brew – the brew of ground snake-bones, and the blood of vampire bats, and the dew from a nighthawk's wings, and other elements unnamable. She had danced in the Black Ceremony – she was ripe to become a *zuvembie* – the Black Brew was all that was needed – the other was beautiful – I could not refuse her."

“Who?” demanded Buckner tensely, but the old man’s head was sunk on his withered breast, and he did not reply. He seemed to slumber as he sat. Buckner shook him. “You gave a brew to make a woman a *zuvembie* – what is a *zuvembie?”*

The old man stirred resentfully and muttered drowsily.

“A *zuvembie* is no longer human. It knows neither relatives nor friends. It is one with the people of the Black World. It commands the natural demons – owls, bats, snakes and werewolves, and can fetch darkness to blot out a little light. It can be slain by lead or steel, but unless it is slain thus, it lives for ever, and it eats no such food as humans eat. It dwells like a bat in a cave or an old house. Time means naught to the *zuvembie;* an hour, a day, a year, all is one. It cannot speak human words, nor think as a human thinks, but it can hypnotize the living by the sound of its voice, and when it slays a man, it can command his lifeless body until the flesh is cold. As long as the blood flows, the corpse is its slave. Its pleasure lies in the slaughter of human beings.”

“And why should one become a *zuvembie?”* asked Buckner softly.

“Hate,” whispered the old man. “Hate! Revenge!”

“Was her name Joan?” murmured Buckner.

It was as if the name penetrated the fogs of senility that clouded the voodoo-man’s mind. He shook himself and the film faded from his eyes, leaving them hard and gleaming as wet black marble.

“Joan?” he said slowly. “I have not heard that name for the span of a generation. I seem to have been sleeping, gentlemen; I do not remember – I ask your pardon. Old men fall asleep before the fire, like old dogs. You asked me of Blassenville Manor? Sir, if I were to tell you why I cannot answer you, you would deem it mere superstition. Yet the white man’s God be my witness –”

As he spoke he was reaching across the hearth for a piece of firewood, groping among the heaps of sticks there. And his voice broke in a scream, as he jerked back his arm convulsively. And a horrible, thrashing, trailing *thing* came with it. Around the voodoo-man’s arm a mottled length of that shape was wrapped and a wicked wedge-shaped head struck again in silent fury.

The old man fell on the hearth, screaming, upsetting the simmering pot and scattering the embers, and then Buckner caught up a billet of firewood and crushed that flat head. Cursing, he kicked aside the knotting, twisting trunk, glaring briefly at the mangled head. Old Jacob had ceased screaming and writhing; he lay still, staring glassily upward.

"Dead?" whispered Griswell.

"Dead as Judas Iscariot," snapped Buckner, frowning at the twitching reptile. "That infernal snake crammed enough poison into his veins to kill a dozen men his age. But I think it was the shock and fright that killed him."

"What shall we do?" asked Griswell, shivering.

"Leave the body on that bunk. Nothin' can hurt it, if we bolt the door so the wild hogs can't get in, or any cat. We'll carry it into town tomorrow. We've got work to do tonight. Let's get goin'."

Griswell shrank from touching the corpse, but he helped Buckner lift it on the rude bunk, and then stumbled hastily out of the hut. The sun was hovering above the horizon, visible in dazzling red flame through the black stems of the trees.

They climbed into the car in silence, and went bumping back along the stumpy terrain.

"He said the Big Snake would send one of his brothers," muttered Griswell.

"Nonsense!" snorted Buckner. "Snakes like warmth, and that swamp is full of them. It crawled in and coiled up among that firewood. Old Jacob disturbed it, and it bit him. Nothin' supernatural about that." After a short silence he said, in a different voice, "That was the first time I ever saw a rattler strike without singin'; and the first time I ever saw a snake *with a white crescent moon on its head."*

They were turning into the main road before either spoke again.

"You think that the mulatto Joan has skulked in the house all these years?" Griswell asked.

"You heard what old Jacob said," answered Buckner grimly. "Time means nothin' to a *zuvembie."*

As they made the last turn in the road, Griswell braced himself against the sight of Blassenville Manor looming black against the red sunset. When it came into view he bit his lip to keep from shrieking. The suggestion of cryptic horror came back in all its power.

"Look!" he whispered from dry lips as they came to a halt beside the road. Buckner grunted.

From the balustrades of the gallery rose a whirling cloud of pigeons that swept away into the sunset, black against the lurid glare.…

III
The Call of Zuvembie

Both men sat rigid for a few moments after the pigeons had flown.

"Well, I've seen them at last," muttered Buckner.

"Only the doomed see them, perhaps," whispered Griswell. "That tramp saw them –"

"Well, we'll see," returned the Southerner tranquilly, as he climbed out of the car, but Griswell noticed him unconsciously hitch forward his scabbarded gun.

The oaken door sagged on broken hinges. Their feet echoed on the broken brick walk. The blind windows reflected the sunset in sheets of flame. As they came into the broad hall Griswell saw the string of black marks that ran across the floor and into the chamber, marking the path of a dead man.

Buckner had brought blankets out of the automobile. He spread them before the fireplace.

"I'll lie next to the door," he said. "You lie where you did last night."

"Shall we light a fire in the grate?" asked Griswell, dreading the thought of the blackness that would cloak the woods when the brief twilight had died.

"No. You've got a flashlight and so have I. We'll lie here in the dark and see what happens. Can you use that gun I gave you?"

"I suppose so. I never fired a revolver, but I know how it's done."

“Well, leave the shootin’ to me, if possible.” The sheriff seated himself cross-legged on his blankets and emptied the cylinder of his big blue Colt, inspecting each cartridge with a critical eye before he replaced it.

Griswell prowled nervously back and forth, begrudging the slow fading of the light as a miser begrudges the waning of his gold. He leaned with one hand against the mantelpiece, staring down into the dust-covered ashes. The fire that produced those ashes must have been built by Elizabeth Blassenville, more than forty years before. The thought was depressing. Idly he stirred the dusty ashes with his toe. Something came to view among the charred debris – a bit of paper, stained and yellowed. Still idly he bent and drew it out of the ashes. It was a note-book with moldering cardboard backs.

“What have you found?” asked Buckner, squinting down the gleaming barrel of his gun.

“Nothing but an old note-book. Looks like a diary. The pages are covered with writing – but the ink is so faded, and the paper is in such a state of decay that I can’t tell much about it. How do you suppose it came in the fireplace, without being burned up?”

“Thrown in long after the fire was out,” surmised Buckner. “Probably found and tossed in the fireplace by somebody who was in here stealin’ furniture. Likely somebody who couldn’t read.”

Griswell fluttered the crumbling leaves listlessly, straining his eyes in the fading light over the yellowed scrawls. Then he stiffened.

“Here’s an entry that’s legible! Listen!” He read:

“ ‘I know someone is in the house besides myself. I can hear someone prowling about at night when the sun has set and the pines are black outside. Often in the night I hear *it* fumbling at my door. *Who* is it? Is it one of my sisters? Is it Aunt Celia? If it is either of these, why does she steal so subtly about the house? Why does she tug at my door, and glide away when I call to her? Shall I go to the door and go out to her? No, no! I dare not! I am afraid. Oh God, what shall I do? I dare not stay here – but where am I to go?’ ”

“By God!” ejaculated Buckner. “That must be Elizabeth Blassenville’s diary! Go on!”

“I can’t make out the rest of the page,” answered Griswell. “But a few pages further on I can make out some lines.” He read:

“ ‘Why did the negroes all run away when Aunt Celia disappeared? My sisters are dead. I know they are dead. I seem to sense that they died horribly, in fear and agony. But why? *Why?* If someone murdered Aunt Celia, why should that person murder my poor sisters? They were always kind to the black people. Joan –’ ” He paused, scowling futilely.

“A piece of the page is torn out. Here’s another entry under another date – at least I judge it’s a date; I can’t make it out for sure.

“ ‘– the awful thing that the old negress hinted at? She named Jacob Blount, and Joan, but she would not speak plainly; perhaps she feared to –’ Part of it gone here; then: ‘No, no! How can it be? *She* is dead – or gone away. Yet – she was born and raised in the West Indies, and from hints she let fall in the past, I know she delved into the mysteries of the voodoo. I believe she even danced in one of their horrible ceremonies – how could she have been such a beast? And this – this horror. God, can such things be? I know not what to think. If it is *she* who roams the house at night, who fumbles at my door, who *whistles* so weirdly and sweetly – no, no, I must be going mad. If I stay here alone I shall die as hideously as my sisters must have died. Of that I am convinced.’ ”

The incoherent chronicle ended as abruptly as it had begun. Griswell was so engrossed in deciphering the scraps that he was not aware that darkness had stolen upon them, hardly aware that Buckner was holding his electric torch for him to read by. Waking from his abstraction he started and darted a quick glance at the black hallway.

“What do you make of it?”

“What I’ve suspected all the time,” answered Buckner. “That mulatto maid Joan turned *zuvembie* to avenge herself on Miss Celia. Probably hated the whole family as much as she did her mistress. She’d taken part in voodoo ceremonies on her native island until she was ‘ripe,’ as old Jacob said. All she needed was the Black Brew – he

supplied that. She killed Miss Celia and the three older girls, and would have gotten Elizabeth but for chance. She's been lurkin' in this old house all these years, like a snake in a ruin."

"But why should she murder a stranger?"

"You heard what old Jacob said," reminded Buckner. "A *zuvembie* finds satisfaction in the slaughter of humans. She called Branner up the stair and split his head and stuck the hatchet in his hand, and sent him downstairs to murder you. No court will ever believe that, but if we can produce her body, that will be evidence enough to prove your innocence. My word will be taken, that she murdered Branner. Jacob said a *zuvembie* could be killed … in reporting this affair I don't have to be too accurate in detail."

"She came and peered over the balustrade of the stair at us," muttered Griswell. "But why didn't we find her tracks on the stair?"

"Maybe you dreamed it. Maybe a *zuvembie* can project her spirit – hell! Why try to rationalize something that's outside the bounds of rationality? Let's begin our watch."

"Don't turn out the light!" exclaimed Griswell involuntarily. Then he added: "Of course. Turn it out. We must be in the dark as" – he gagged a bit – "as Branner and I were."

But fear like a physical sickness assailed him when the room was plunged in darkness. He lay trembling and his heart beat so heavily he felt as if he would suffocate.

"The West Indies must be the plague spot of the world," muttered Buckner, a blur on his blankets. "I've heard of *zombies*. Never knew before what a *zuvembie* was. Evidently some drug concocted by the voodoo-men to induce madness in women. That doesn't explain other things, though: the hypnotic powers, the abnormal longevity, the ability to control corpses – no, a *zuvembie* can't be merely a madwoman. It's a monster, something more and less than a human being, created by the magic that spawns in black swamps and jungles – well, we'll see."

His voice ceased, and in the silence Griswell heard the pounding of his own heart. Outside in the black woods a wolf howled eerily, and owls hooted. Then silence fell again like a black fog.

Griswell forced himself to lie still on his blankets. Time seemed at a standstill. He felt as if he were choking. The suspense was growing unendurable; the effort he made to control his crumbling nerves bathed his limbs in sweat. He clenched his teeth until his jaws ached and almost locked, and the nails of his fingers bit deeply into his palms.

He did not know what he was expecting. The fiend would strike again – but how? Would it be a horrible, sweet whistling, bare feet stealing down the creaking steps, or a sudden hatchet-stroke in the dark? Would it choose him or Buckner? *Was Buckner already dead?* He could see nothing in the blackness, but he heard the man's steady breathing. The Southerner must have nerves of steel. Or was that Buckner breathing beside him, separated by a narrow strip of darkness? Had the fiend already struck in silence, and taken the sheriff's place, there to lie in ghoulish glee until it was ready to strike? – a thousand hideous fancies assailed Griswell tooth and claw.

He began to feel that he would go mad if he did not leap to his feet, screaming, and burst frenziedly out of that accursed house – not even the fear of the gallows could keep him lying there in the darkness any longer – the rhythm of Buckner's breathing was suddenly broken, and Griswell felt as if a bucket of ice-water had been poured over him. From somewhere above them rose a sound of weird, sweet whistling….

Griswell's control snapped, plunging his brain into darkness deeper than the physical blackness which engulfed him. There was a period of absolute blankness, in which a realization of *motion* was his first sensation of awakening consciousness. He was running, madly, stumbling over an incredibly rough road. All was darkness about him, and he ran blindly. Vaguely he realized that he must have bolted from the house, and fled for perhaps miles before his overwrought brain began to function. He did not care; dying on the gallows for a murder he never committed did not terrify him half as much as the thought of returning to that house of horror. He was overpowered by the urge to run – run – run as he was running now, blindly, until he reached the end of his endurance. The mist had not

yet fully lifted from his brain, but he was aware of a dull wonder that he could not see the stars through the black branches. He wished vaguely that he could see where he was going. He believed he must be climbing a hill, and that was strange, for he knew there were no hills within miles of the Manor. Then above and ahead of him a dim glow began.

He scrambled toward it, over ledge-like projections that were more and more and more taking on a disquieting symmetry. Then he was horror-stricken to realize that a sound was impacting on his ears – *a weird mocking whistle*. The sound swept the mists away. Why, what was this? *Where was he?* Awakening and realization came like the stunning stroke of a butcher's maul. He was not fleeing along a road, or climbing a hill; he was mounting a stair. He was still in Blassenville Manor! *And he was climbing the stair!*

An inhuman scream burst from his lips. Above it the mad whistling rose in a ghoulish piping of demoniac triumph. He tried to stop – to turn back – even to fling himself over the balustrade. His shrieking rang unbearably in his own ears. But his will-power was shattered to bits. It did not exist. He had no will. He had dropped his flashlight, and he had forgotten the gun in his pocket. He could not command his own body. His legs, moving stiffly, worked like pieces of mechanism detached from his brain, obeying an outside will. Clumping methodically they carried him shrieking up the stair toward the witch-fire glow shimmering above him.

"Buckner!" he screamed. "Buckner! Help, for God's sake!"

His voice strangled in his throat. He had reached the upper landing. He was tottering down the hallway. The whistling sank and ceased, but its impulsion still drove him on. He could not see from what source the dim glow came. It seemed to emanate from no central focus. But he saw a vague figure shambling toward him. It looked like a woman, but no human woman ever walked with that skulking gait, and no human woman ever had that face of horror, that leering yellow blur of lunacy – he tried to scream at the sight of

that face, at the glint of keen steel in the uplifted claw-like hand – but his tongue was frozen.

Then something crashed deafeningly behind him, the shadows were split by a tongue of flame which lit a hideous figure falling backward. Hard on the heels of the report rang an inhuman squawk.

In the darkness that followed the flash Griswell fell to his knees and covered his face with his hands. He did not hear Buckner's voice. The Southerner's hand on his shoulder shook him out of his swoon.

A light in his eyes blinded him. He blinked, shaded his eyes, looked up into Buckner's face, bending at the rim of the circle of light. The sheriff was pale.

"Are you hurt? God, man, are you hurt? There's a butcher knife there on the floor –"

"I'm not hurt," mumbled Griswell. "You fired just in time – the fiend! Where is it? Where did it go?"

"Listen!"

Somewhere in the house there sounded a sickening flopping and flapping as of something that thrashed and struggled in its death convulsions.

"Jacob was right," said Buckner grimly. "Lead can kill them. I hit her, all right. Didn't dare use my flashlight, but there was enough light. When that whistlin' started you almost walked over me gettin' out. I knew you were hypnotized, or whatever it is. I followed you up the stairs. I was right behind you, but crouchin' low so she wouldn't see me, and maybe get away again. I almost waited too long before I fired – but the sight of her almost paralyzed me. Look!"

He flashed his light down the hall, and now it shone bright and clear. And it shone on an aperture gaping in the wall where no door had showed before.

"The secret panel Miss Elizabeth found!" Buckner snapped. "Come on!"

He ran across the hallway and Griswell followed him dazedly. The flopping and thrashing came from beyond that mysterious door, and now the sounds had ceased.

The light revealed a narrow, tunnel-like corridor that evidently led through one of the thick walls. Buckner plunged into it without hesitation.

“Maybe it couldn’t think like a human,” he muttered, shining his light ahead of him. “But it had sense enough to erase its tracks last night so we couldn’t trail it to that point in the wall and maybe find the secret panel. There’s a room ahead – the secret room of the Blassenvilles!”

And Griswell cried out: “My God! It’s the windowless chamber I saw in my dream, with the three bodies hanging – ahhhhh!”

Buckner’s light playing about the circular chamber became suddenly motionless. In that wide ring of light three figures appeared, three dried, shriveled, mummy-like shapes, still clad in the moldering garments of the last century. Their slippers were clear of the floor as they hung by their withered necks from chains suspended from the ceiling.

“The three Blassenville sisters!” muttered Buckner. “Miss Elizabeth wasn’t crazy, after all.”

“Look!” Griswell could barely make his voice intelligible. “There – over there in the corner!”

The light moved, halted.

“Was that thing a woman once?” whispered Griswell. “God, look at that face, even in death. Look at those claw-like hands, with black talons like those of a beast. Yes, it was human, though – even the

rags of an old ballroom gown. Why should a mulatto maid wear such a dress, I wonder?"

"This has been her lair for over forty years," muttered Buckner, brooding over the grinning grisly thing sprawling in the corner. "This clears you, Griswell – a crazy woman with a hatchet – that's all the authorities need to know. God, what a revenge! – what a foul revenge! Yet what a bestial nature she must have had, in the beginnin', to delve into voodoo as she must have done –"

"The mulatto woman?" whispered Griswell, dimly sensing a horror that overshadowed all the rest of the terror.

Buckner shook his head. "We misunderstood old Jacob's maunderin's, and the things Miss Elizabeth wrote – *she* must have known, but family pride sealed her lips. Griswell, I understand now; the mulatto woman had her revenge, but not as we supposed. She didn't drink the Black Brew old Jacob fixed for her. It was for somebody else, to be given secretly in her food, or coffee, no doubt. Then Joan ran away, leavin' the seeds of the hell she'd sowed to grow."

"That – that's not the mulatto woman?" whispered Griswell.

"When I saw her out there in the hallway I knew she was no mulatto. And those distorted features still reflect a family likeness. I've seen her portrait, and I can't be mistaken. There lies the creature that was once Celia Blassenville."

OceanofPDF.com

Never Beyond the Beast

Rise to the peak of the ladder
   Where the ghosts of the planets feast –
Out of the reach of the adder –
   Never beyond the Beast.
He is there, in the abyss brooding,
   Where the nameless black fires fall;
He is there, in the stars intruding,
   Where the sun is a silver ball.

Beyond all weeping or revel,
   He lurks in the cloud and the sod;
He grips the doors of the Devil
   And the hasp on the gates of God. Build and endeavor and fashion
–
Never can you escape
The blind black brutish passion –
   The lust of the primal Ape.

OceanofPDF.com

Wild Water

Saul Hopkins was king of Locust Valley, but kingship never turned hot lead. In the wild old days, not so long distant, another man was king of the Valley, and his methods were different and direct. He ruled by the guns, wire-clippers and branding irons of his wiry, hard-handed, hard-eyed riders. But those days were past and gone, and Saul Hopkins sat in his office in Bisley and pulled strings to which were tied loans and mortgages and the subtle tricks of finance.

Times have changed since Locust Valley reverberated to the guns of rival cattlemen, and Saul Hopkins, by all modern standards, should have lived and died king of the Valley by virtue of his gold and lands; but he met a man in whom the old ways still lived.

It began when John Brill's farm was sold under the hammer. Saul Hopkins' representative was there to bid. But three hundred hard-eyed ranchers and farmers were there, too. They rode in from the river bottoms and the hill country to the west and north, in ramshackle flivvers, in hacks, and on horseback. Some of them came on foot. They had a keg of tar, and half a dozen old feather pillows. The representative of big business understood. He stood aside and made no attempt to bid. The auction took place, and the farmers and ranchers were the only bidders. Land, implements and stock sold for exactly $7.55; and the whole was handed back to John Brill.

When Saul Hopkins heard of it, he turned white with fury. It was the first time his kingship had ever been flouted. He set the wheels of the law to grinding, and before another day passed, John Brill and nine of his friends were locked in the old stone jail at Bisley. Up along the bare oak ridges and down along the winding creeks where poverty-stricken farmers labored under the shadow of Saul Hopkins' mortgages, went the word that the scene at Brill's farm would not be duplicated. The next foreclosure would be attended by enough armed deputies to see that the law was upheld. And the men of the creeks and the hills knew that the promise was no idle one. Meanwhile, Saul Hopkins prepared to have John Brill prosecuted

with all the power of his wealth and prestige. And Jim Reynolds came to Bisley to see the king.

Reynolds was John Brill's brother-in-law. He lived in the high postoak country north of Bisley. Bisley lay on the southern slope of that land of long ridges and oak thickets. To the south the slopes broke into fan shaped valleys, traversed by broad streams. The people in those fat valleys were prosperous; farmers who had come late into the country, and pushed out the cattlemen who had once owned it all.

Up on the high ridges of the Lost Knob country, it was different. The land was rocky and sterile, the grass thin. The ridges were occupied by the descendants of old pioneers, nesters, tenant farmers, and broken cattlemen. They were poor, and there was an old feud between them and the people of the southern valleys. Money had to be borrowed from somebody of the latter clan, and that intensified the bitterness.

Jim Reynolds was an atavism, the personification of anachronism. He had lived a comparatively law-abiding life, working on farms, ranches, and in the oil fields that lay to the east, but in him always smoldered an unrest and a resentment against conditions that restricted and repressed him. Recent events had fanned these embers into flame. His mind leaped as naturally toward personal violence as that of the average modern man turns to processes of law. He was literally born out of his time. He should have lived his life a generation before, when men threw a wide loop and rode long trails.

He drove into Bisley in his Ford roadster at nine o'clock one night. He stopped his car on French Street, parked, and turned into an alley that led into Hopkins Street – named for the man who owned most of the property on it. It was a quirk in the man's nature that he should cling to the dingy little back street office in which he first got his start.

Hopkins Street was narrow, lined mainly with small offices, warehouses, and the backs of buildings that faced on more pretentious streets. By night it was practically deserted. Bisley was not a large town, and except on Saturday night, even her main

streets were not thronged after dark. Reynolds saw no one as he walked swiftly down the narrow sidewalk toward a light which streamed through a door and a plate glass window.

There the king of Locust Valley worked all day and late into the night, establishing and strengthening his kingship.

The grim old warrior who had kinged it in the Valley in an earlier generation knew the men he had to deal with. He wore two guns in loose scabbards, and cold-eyed gunmen rode with him, night or day. Saul Hopkins had dealt in paper and figures so long he had forgotten the human equation. He understood a menace only as a threat against his money – not against himself.

He bent over his desk, a tall, gaunt, stooped man, with a mop of straggly grey hair and the hooked nose of a vulture. He looked up irritably as some one bulked in the door that opened directly on the street. Jim Reynolds stood there – broad, dark as an Indian, one hand under his coat. His eyes burned like coals. Saul Hopkins went cold, as he sensed, for the first time in his life, a menace that was not directed against his gold and his lands, but against his body and his life. No word was passed between them, but an electric spark of understanding jumped across the intervening space.

With a strangled cry old Hopkins sprang up, knocking his swivel chair backward, stumbling against his desk. Jim Reynolds' hand came from beneath his coat gripping a Colt .45. The report thundered deafeningly in the small office. Old Saul cried out chokingly and rocked backward, clutching at his breast. Another slug caught him in the groin, crumpling him down across the desk, and as he fell, he jerked sidewise to the smash of a third bullet in his belly. He sprawled over the desk, spouting blood, and clawing blindly at nothing, slid off and blundered to the floor, his convulsive fingers full of torn papers which fell on him in a white, fluttering shower from the blood splashed desk.

Jim Reynolds eyed him unemotionally, the smoking gun in his hand. Acrid powder fumes filled the office, and the echoes seemed to be still reverberating. Whistling gasps slobbered through Saul Hopkins' grey lips and he jerked spasmodically. He was not yet dead, but Reynolds knew he was dying. And galvanized into sudden

action, Reynolds turned and went out on the street. Less than a minute had passed since the first shot crashed, but a man was running up the street, gun in hand, shouting loudly. It was Mike Daley, a policeman. Reynolds knew that it would be several minutes, at least, before the rest of the small force could reach the scene. He stood motionless, his gun hanging at his side.

Daley rushed up, panting, poking his pistol at the silent killer.

"Hands up, Reynolds!" he gasped. "What the hell have you done? My God, have you shot Mr. Hopkins? Give me that gun – give it to me."

Reynolds reversed his .45, dangling it by his index finger through the trigger guard, the butt toward Daley. The policeman grabbed for it, lowering his own gun unconsciously as he reached. The big Colt spun on Reynolds' finger, the butt slapped into his palm, and Daley glared wild eyed into the black muzzle. He was paralyzed by the trick – a trick which in itself showed Reynolds' anachronism. That roll, reliance of the old time gunman, had not been used in that region for a generation.

"Drop your gun!" snapped Reynolds. Daley dumbly opened his fingers and as his gun slammed on the sidewalk, the long barrel of Reynolds' Colt lifted, described an arc and smashed down on the policeman's head. Daley fell beside his fallen gun, and Reynolds ran down the narrow street, cut through an alley and came out on French Street a few steps from where his car was parked.

Behind him he heard men shouting and running. A few loiterers on French Street gaped at him, shrank back at the sight of the gun in his hand. He sprang to the wheel and roared down French Street, shot across the bridge that spanned Locust Creek, and raced up the road. There were few residences in that end of town, where the business section abutted on the very bank of the creek. Within a few minutes he was in open country, with only scattered farmhouses here and there.

He had not even glanced toward the rock jail where his friends lay. He knew the uselessness of an attempt to free them, even were it successful. He had only followed his instinct when he killed Saul Hopkins. He felt neither remorse nor exultation, only the grim

satisfaction of a necessary job well done. His nature was exactly that of the old-time feudist, who, when pushed beyond endurance, killed his man, took to the hills and fought it out with all who came against him. Eventual escape did not enter his calculations. His was the grim fatalism of the old time gun fighter. He merely sought a lair where he could turn at bay. Otherwise he would have stayed and shot it out with the Bisley police.

A mile beyond the bridge the road split into three forks. One led due north to Sturling, whence it swung westward to Lost Knob; he had followed that road, coming into Bisley. One led to the north west, and was the old Lost Knob road, discontinued since the creation of Bisley Lake. The other turned westward and led to other settlements in the hills.

He took the old north west road. He had met no one. There was little travel in the hills at night. And this road was particularly lonely. There were long stretches where not even a farm house stood, and now the road was cut off from the northern settlements by the great empty basin of the newly created Bisley Lake, which lay waiting for rains and head rises to fill it.

The pitch was steadily upward. Mesquites gave way to dense postoak thickets. Rocks jutted out of the ground, making the road uneven and bumpy. The hills loomed darkly around him.

Ten miles out of Bisley and five miles from the Lake, he turned from the road and entered a wire gate. Closing it behind him, he drove along a dim path which wound crookedly up a hill side, flanked thickly with postoaks. Looking back, he saw no headlights cutting the sky. He must have been seen driving out of town, but no one saw him take the north west road. Pursuers would naturally suppose he had taken one of the other roads. He could not reach Lost Knob by the north west road, because, although the lake basin was still dry, what of the recent drouth, the bridges had been torn down over Locust Creek, which he must cross again before coming to Lost Knob, and over Mesquital.

He followed a curve in the path, with a steep bluff to his right, and coming onto a level space strewn with broken boulders, saw a low-roofed house looming darkly ahead of him. Behind it and off to

one side stood barns, sheds and corrals, all bulked against a background of postoak woods. No lights showed.

He halted in front of the sagging porch – there was no yard fence – and sprang up on the porch, hammering on the door. Inside a sleepy voice demanded his business.

"Are you by yourself?" demanded Reynolds. The voice assured him profanely that such was the case. "Then get up and open the door; it's me – Jim Reynolds."

There was a stirring in the house, creak of bed springs, prodigious yawns, and a shuffling step. A light flared as a match was struck. The door opened, revealing a gaunt figure in a dingy union suit, holding an oil lamp in one hand.

"What's up, Jim?" demanded the figure, yawning and blinking. "Come in. Hell of a time of night to wake a man up –"

"It ain't ten o'clock yet," answered Reynolds. "Joel, I've just come from Bisley. I killed Saul Hopkins."

The gaping mouth, in the middle of a yawn, clapped shut with a strangling sound. The lamp rocked wildly in Joel Jackson's hand, and Reynolds caught it to steady it.

"Saul Hopkins?" In the flickering light Jackson's face was the hue of ashes. "My God, they'll hang you! Are they after you? What –"

"They won't hang me," answered Reynolds grimly. "Only reason I run was there's some things I want to do before they catch me. Joel, you've got reasons for befriendin' me. I can't hide out in the hills all the time, because there's nothin' to eat. You live here alone, and don't have many visitors. I'm goin' to stay here a few days till the search moves into another part of the country, then I'm goin' back into Bisley and do the rest of my job. If I can kill that lawyer of Hopkins' and Judge Blaine and Billy Leary, the chief of police, I'll die happy."

"But they'll comb these hills!" exclaimed Jackson wildly. "They can't keep from findin' you –"

"Hang on to your nerve," grunted Reynolds. "We'll run my car into that ravine back of this hill and cover it up with brush. Take a regular bloodhound to find it. I'll stay in the house here, or in the barn, and when we see anybody comin', I'll duck out into the brush.

Only way they can get here in a car is to climb that foot path like I did. Besides, they won't waste much time huntin' this close to Bisley. They'll take a sweep through the country, and if they don't find me right easy, they'll figger I've made for Lost Knob. They'll question you, of course, but if you'll keep your backbone stiff and look 'em in the eye when you lie about it, I don't think they'll bother to search your farm."

"Alright," shivered Jackson, "but it'll go hard with me if they find out." He was numbed by the thought of Reynolds' deed. It had never occurred to him that a man as "big" as Saul Hopkins could be shot down like an ordinary human.

Little was said between the men as they drove the car down the rocky hillside and into the ravine; wedged into the dense shinnery, they skilfully masked its presence.

"A blind man could tell a car's been driv down that hill," complained Jackson.

"Not after tonight," answered Reynolds, with a glance at the sky. "I believe it's goin' to rain like hell in a few hours."

"It is mighty hot and still," agreed Jackson. "I hope it does rain. We're needin' it. We didn't get no winter seasonin' –"

"What the hell do you care for your crops?" growled Reynolds. "You don't own 'em; nobody in these hills owns anything. Everything you all got is mortgaged to the hilt – some of it more'n once. You, personally, been lucky to keep up the interest; you sag once, and see what happens to you. You'll be just like my brother-in-law John, and a lot of others. You all are a pack of fools, just like I told him. To hell with strugglin' along and slavin' just to put fine clothes on somebody else's backs, and good grub into their bellies. You ain't workin' for yourselves; you're workin' for them you owe money to."

"Well, what can we do?" protested Jackson. Reynolds grinned wolfishly.

"You know what I done tonight. Saul Hopkins won't never throw no other man out of his house and home to starve. But there's plenty like him. If you farmers would listen to me, you'd throw down your rakes and pick up your guns. Up here in these hills we'd make a war

out of it that'd make the Bloody Lincoln County War look plumb tame."

Jackson's teeth chattered as with an ague. "We couldn't do it, Jim. Times is changed, can't you understand? You talk just like them old-time outlaws my dad used to tell me about. We can't fight with guns like our fathers used to do. The governor'd send soldiers to hunt us down. Keepin' a man from biddin' at a auction is one thing; fightin' state soldiers is another. We're just licked and got to know it."

"You're talkin' just like John and all the others," sneered Reynolds. "Well, John's in jail and they say he's goin' to the pen; but I'm free and Saul Hopkins is in hell. What you say to that?"

"I'm afeared it'll be the ruin of us all," moaned Jackson.

"You and your fears," snarled Reynolds. "Men ain't got the guts of lice no more. I thought, when the farmers took over that auction, they was gettin' their bristles up. But they ain't. Your old man wouldn't have knuckled down like you're doin'. Well, I know what I'm goin' to do, if I have to go it alone. I'll get plenty of them before they get me, damn 'em. Come on in the house and fix me up somethin' to eat."

Much had been crowded into a short time. It was only eleven o'clock. Stillness held the land in its grip. The stars had been blotted out by a grey haze-like veil which, rising in the north west, had spread over the sky with surprizing speed. Far away on the horizon lightning flickered redly. There was a breathless tenseness in the air. Breezes sprang up, blew fitfully from the south east, and as quickly died down. Somewhere off in the wooded hills a night bird called uneasily. A cow bawled anxiously in the corral. The beasts sensed an impending something in the atmosphere, and the men, raised in the hills, were no less responsive to the portents of the night.

"Been a kind of haze in the sky all day," muttered Jackson, glancing out the window as he fumbled about, setting cold fried bacon, corn bread, and a pot of red beans on the rough hewn table before his guest. "Been lightnin' in the north west since sundown. Wouldn't be surprized if we had a regular storm. 'Bout that time of the year."

“Likely,” grunted Reynolds, his mouth full of pork and corn bread. “Joel, dern you, ain’t you got nothin’ to drink better’n buttermilk?”

Jackson reached up into the tin-doored cupboard and brought down a jug. He pulled out the corn-cob stopper and tilted the mouth into a tin cup. The reek of white corn juice filled the room, and Reynolds smacked his lips appreciatively.

“Hell, Joel, you ought not to be scared of hidin’ me, long as you’ve kept that still of your’n hid.”

“That’s different,” muttered Jackson uneasily. “You know, though, I’ll do all I can to help you out.”

He watched his friend in morbid fascination as Reynolds wolfed down the food and gulped the fiery liquor with keen relish.

“I don’t see how you can set there and eat like that. Don’t it make you kind of sick – thinkin’ about Hopkins?”

“Why should it?” Reynolds’ eyes became grim as he set down the cup and stared at his host. “Throwed John out of his home, and him with a wife and kids, and then was goin’ to send him to the pen – how much you think a man ought to take off a skunk like that?”

Jackson avoided his gaze and looked out the window. Away off in the distance came the first low grumble of thunder. The lightning played constantly along the north western horizon, splaying out to east and west.

“Comin’ up sure,” mumbled Jackson. “Reckon they’ll get some water in Bisley Lake. Engineers said it’d take three years to fill it, at the rate of rainfall in this country. I say one big rain like some I’ve seen, would do the job. An awful lot of water can come down Locust and Mesquital.”

He opened the door and went out. Reynolds followed. The breathlessness of the atmosphere was even more intense. The haze-like veil had thickened; not a star was visible. The crowding hills with their black thickets rendered the darkness even more dense; but it was cut by the incessant glare of the lightning – distant, but growing more vivid. In the flashes a long low-lying bank of inky blackness could be seen hugging the north western horizon.

“Funny the laws ain’t been up the road,” muttered Jackson. “I been listenin’ for cars.”

“Reckon they’re searchin’ the other roads,” answered Reynolds. “Take some time to get up a posse after night, anyway. They’ll be burnin’ up the telephone wires. I reckon you got the only phone there is on this road, ain’t you, Joel?”

“Yeah; folks couldn’t keep up the rent on ’em. By gosh, that cloud’s comin’ up slow, but it sure is black. I bet it’s been rainin’ pitch forks on the head of Locust for hours.”

“I’m goin’ to walk down towards the road,” said Reynolds. “I can see a headlight a lot quicker down there than I can up here, for all these postoaks. I’ve got an idea they’ll be up here askin’ questions before mornin’. But if you lie like I’ve seen you, they won’t suspect enough to go prowlin’ around.”

Jackson shuddered at the prospect. Reynolds walked down the winding path, and disappeared among the flanking oaks. But he did not go far. He suddenly remembered that the dishes out of which he had eaten were still on the kitchen table. That might cause suspicion if the law dropped in suddenly. He turned and headed swiftly back toward the house. And as he went, he heard a peculiar tingling noise he was at first unable to identify. Then he was electrified by sudden suspicion. It was such a sound as a telephone would make, if rung while a quilt or cloak was held over it to muzzle the sound from some one near at hand.

Crouching like a panther, he stole up, and looking through a crack in the door, saw Jackson standing at the phone. The man shook like a leaf and great beads of sweat stood out on his grey face. His voice was strangled and unnatural.

“Yes, yes!” he was mouthing. “I tell you, he’s here now! He’s gone down to the road, to watch for the cops. Come here as quick as you can, Leary – and come yourself. He’s bad! I’ll try to get him drunk, or asleep, or somethin’. Anyway, hurry, and for God’s sake, don’t let on I told you, even after you got him corralled.”

Reynolds threw back the door and stepped in, his face a death-mask. Jackson wheeled, saw him, and gave a choked croak. His face turned hideous; the receiver fell from his fingers and dangled at the end of its cord.

"My God, Reynolds!" he screamed. "Don't – don't –"

Reynolds took a single step; his gun went up and smashed down; the heavy barrel crunched against Jackson's skull. The man went down like a slaughtered ox and lay twitching, his eyes closed, and blood oozing from a deep gash in his scalp, and from his nose and ears as well.

Reynolds stood over him an instant, snarling silently. Then he stepped to the phone and lifted the receiver. No sound came over the wire. He wondered if the man at the other end had hung up before Jackson screamed. He hung the receiver back on its hook, and strode out of the house.

A savage resentment made thinking a confused and muddled process. Jackson, the one man south of Lost Knob he had thought he could trust, had betrayed him – not for gain, not for revenge, but simply because of his cowardice. Reynolds snarled wordlessly. He was trapped; he could not reach Lost Knob in his car, and he would not have time to drive back down the Bisley road, and find another road, before the police would be racing up it. Suddenly he laughed, and it was not a good laugh to hear.

A fierce excitement galvanized him. By God, Fate had worked into his hands, after all! He did not wish to escape, only to slay before he died. Leary was one of the men he had marked for death. And Leary was coming to the Jackson farm house.

He took a step toward the corral, glanced at the sky, turned, ran back into the house, found and donned a slicker. By that time the lightning was a constant glare overhead. It was astounding – incredible. A man could almost have read a book by it. The whole northern and western sky was veined with irregular cords of blinding crimson which ran back and forth, leaping to the earth, flickering back into the heavens, crisscrossing and interlacing. Thunder rumbled, growing louder. The bank in the north west had grown appallingly. From the east around to the middle of the west it loomed, black as doom. Hills, thickets, road and buildings were bathed weirdly in the red glare as Reynolds ran to the corral where the horses whimpered fearfully. Still there was no sound in the elements but the thunder. Somewhere off in the hills a wind howled shudderingly, then ceased abruptly.

Reynolds found bridle, blanket and saddle, threw them on a restive and uneasy horse, and led it out of the corral and down behind the cliff which flanked the path that led up to the house. He tied the animal behind a thicket where it could not be seen from the path. Up in the house the oil lamp still burned. Reynolds did not bother to look to Joel Jackson. If the man ever regained consciousness at all, it would not be for many hours. Reynolds knew the effect of such a blow as he had dealt.

Minutes passed, ten – fifteen. Now he heard a sound that was not of the thunder – a distant purring that swiftly grew louder. A shaft

that was not lightning stabbed the sky to the south east. It was lost, then appeared again. Reynolds knew it was an automobile topping the rises. He crouched behind a rock in a shinnery thicket close to the path, just above the point where it swung close to the rim of the low bluff.

Now he could see the headlights glinting through the trees like a pair of angry eyes. The eyes of the Law! he thought sardonically, and hugged himself with venomous glee. The car halted, then came on, marking the entering of the gate. They had not bothered to close the gate, he knew, and felt an instinctive twinge of resentment. That was typical of those Bisley laws – leave a man's gate open, and let all his stock get out.

Now the automobile was mounting the hill, and he grew tense. Either Leary had not heard Jackson's scream shudder over the wires, or else he was reckless. Reynolds nestled further down behind his rock. The lights swept over his head as the car came around the cliff-flanked turn. Lightning conspired to dazzle him, but as the headlights completed their arc and turned away from him, he made out the bulk of men in the car, and the glint of guns. Directly overhead thunder bellowed and a freak of lightning played full on the climbing automobile. In its brief flame he saw the car was crowded – five men, at least, and the chances were that it was Chief Leary at the wheel, though he could not be sure, in that illusive illumination.

The car picked up speed, skirting the cliff – and now Jim Reynolds thrust his .45 through the stems of the shinnery, and fired by the flare of the lightning. His shot merged with a rolling clap of thunder. The car lurched wildly as its driver, shot through the head, slumped over the wheel. Yells of terror rose as it swerved toward the cliff edge. But the man on the seat with the driver dropped his shotgun and caught frantically at the wheel.

Reynolds was standing now, firing again and again, but he could not duplicate the amazing luck of that first shot. Lead raked the car and a man yelped, but the policeman at the wheel hung on tenaciously, hindered by the corpse which slumped over it, and the car, swinging away from the bluff, roared erratically across the path,

crashed through bushes and shinnery, and caromed with terrific impact against a boulder, buckling the radiator and hurling men out like tenpins.

Reynolds yelled his savage disappointment, and sent the last bullet in his gun whining viciously among the figures stirring dazedly on the ground about the smashed car. At that, their stunned minds went to work. They rolled into the brush and behind rocks. Tongues of flame began to spit at him, as they gave back his fire. He ducked down into the shinnery again. Bullets hummed over his head, or smashed against the rock in front of him, and on the heels of a belching blast there came a myriad venomous whirrings through the brush as of many bees. Somebody had salvaged a shotgun.

The wildness of the shooting told of unmanned nerves and shattered morale, but Reynolds, crouching low as he reloaded, swore at the fewness of his cartridges.

He had failed in the great coup he had planned. The car had not gone over the bluff. Four policemen still lived, and now, hiding in the thickets, they had the advantage. They could circle back and gain the house without showing themselves to his fire; they could phone for reinforcements. But he grinned fiercely as the flickering lightning showed him the body that sagged over the broken door where the impact of the collision had tossed it like a rag doll. He had not made a mistake; it was chief of police Leary who had stopped his first bullet.

The world was a hell of sound and flame; the cracking of pistols and shotguns was almost drowned in the terrific cannonade of the skies. The whole sky, when not lit by flame, was pitch black. Great sheets and ropes and chains of fire leaped terribly across the dusky vault, and the reverberations of the thunder made the earth tremble. Between the bellowings came sharp claps that almost split the ear drums. Yet not a drop of rain had fallen.

The continual glare was more confusing than utter darkness. Men shot wildly and blindly. And Reynolds began backing cautiously through the shinnery. Behind it, the ground sloped quickly, breaking off into the cliff that skirted the path further down. Down the

incline Reynolds slid recklessly, and ran for his horse, half frantic on its tether. The men in the brush above yelled and blazed away vainly as they got a fleeting glimpse of him.

He ducked behind the thicket that masked the horse, tore the animal free, leaped into the saddle – and then the rain came. It did not come as it comes in less violent lands. It was as if a flood-gate had been opened on high – as if the bottom had been jerked out of a celestial rain barrel. A gulf of water descended in one appalling roar.

The wind was blowing now, roaring through the fire torn night, bending the trees, but its fury was less than the rain. Reynolds, clinging to his maddened horse, felt the beast stagger to the buffeting. Despite his slicker, the man was soaked in an instant. It was not raining in drops, but in driving sheets, in thundering cascades. His horse reeled and floundered in the torrents which were already swirling down the gulches and draws. The lightning had not ceased; it played all around him, veiled in the falling flood like fire shining through frosted glass, turning the world to frosty silver.

For a few moments he saw the light in the farm house behind him, and he tried to use it as his compass, riding directly away from it. Then it was blotted out by the shoulder of a hill, and he rode in fire-lit darkness, his sense of direction muddled and confused. He did not try to find a path, or to get back to the road, but headed straight out across the hills.

It was bitter hard going. His horse staggered in rushing rivelets, slipped on muddy slopes, blundered into trees, scratching his rider's face and hands. In the driving rain there was no seeing any distance; the blinding lightning was a hindrance rather than a help. And the bombardment of the heavens did not cease. Reynolds rode through a hell of fire and fury, blinded, stunned and dazed by the cataclysmic war of the elements. It was nature gone mad – a saturnalia of the elements in which all sense of place and time was dimmed.

Nearby a dazzling white jet forked from the black sky with a stunning crack, and a knotted oak flew into splinters. With a shrill

neigh, Reynolds' mount bolted, blundering over rocks and through bushes. A tree limb struck Reynolds' head, and the man fell forward over the saddle horn, dazed, keeping his seat by instinct.

It was the rain, slashing savagely in his face, that brought him to his full senses. He did not know how long he had clung to his saddle in a dazed condition, while the horse wandered at will. He wondered dully at the violence of the rain. It had not abated, though the wind was not blowing now, and the lightning had decreased much in intensity.

Grimly he gathered up the hanging reins and headed into the direction he believed was north. God, would the rain never cease? It had become a monster – an ogreish perversion of nature. It had been thundering down for hours, and still it threshed and beat, as if it poured from an inexhaustible reservoir.

He felt his horse jolt against something and stop, head drooping to the blast. The blazing sky showed him that the animal was breasting a barbed wire fence. He dismounted, fumbled for the wire clippers in the saddle pocket, cut the strands, mounted, and rode wearily on.

He topped a rise, emerged from the screening oaks and stared, blinking. At first he could not realize what he saw, it was so incongruous and alien. But he had to believe his senses. He looked on a gigantic body of water, rolling as far as he could see, lashed into foaming frenzy, under the play of the lightning.

Then the truth rushed upon him. He was looking at Bisley Lake! Bisley Lake, which that morning had been an empty basin, with its only water that which flowed along the rocky beds of Locust Creek and Mesquital, reduced by a six months' drouth to a trickle. There in the hills, just east of where the streams merged, a dam had been built by the people of Bisley with intent to irrigate. But money had run short. The ditches had not been dug, though the dam had been completed. There lay the lake basin, ready for use, but, so far, useless. Three years would be required to fill it, the engineers said, considering average rainfall. But they were Easterners. With all their technical education they had not counted on the terrific volume of water which could rush down those postoak ridges during such a

rain as had been falling. Because it was ordinarily a dry country, they had not realized that such floods could fall. From Lost Knob to Bisley the land fell at the rate of a hundred and fifty feet to every ten miles; Locust Creek and Mesquital drained a watershed of immense expanse, and were fed by myriad branches winding down from the higher ridges. Now, halted in its rush to the Gulf, this water was piling up in Bisley Lake.

Three years? It had filled in a matter of *hours!* Reynolds looked dazedly on the biggest body of water he had ever seen – seventy miles of waterfront, and God only knew how deep in the channels of the rivers! The rain must have assumed the proportions of a water-spout higher up on the heads of the creeks.

The rain was slackening. He knew it must be nearly dawn. Glints of daylight would be showing, but for the clouds and rain. He had been toiling through the storm for hours.

In the flare of the lightning he saw huge logs and trees whirling in the foaming wash; he saw broken buildings, and the bodies of cows, hogs, sheep, and horses, and sodden shocks of grain. He cursed to think of the havoc wrought. Fresh fury rose in him against the people of Bisley. Them and their cursed dam! Any fool ought to know it would back the water up the creeks for twenty miles and force it out of banks and over into fields and pastures. As usual, it was the hill dwellers who suffered.

He looked uneasily at the dark line of the dam. It didn't look so big and solid as it did when the lake basin was empty, but he knew it would resist any strain. And it afforded him a bridge. The rain would cover his tracks. Wires would be down – though doubtless by this time news of his killings had been spread all over the country. Anyway, the storm would have paralyzed pursuit for a few hours. He could get back to the Lost Knob country, and into hiding.

He dismounted and led the horse out on the dam. It snorted and trembled, in fear of the water churned into foam by the drumming rain, so close beneath its feet, but he soothed it and led it on.

If God had made that gorge especially for a lake, He could not have planned it better. It was the south eastern outlet of a great basin, walled with steep hills. The gorge itself was in the shape of a

gigantic V, with the narrow bottom turned toward the east, and the legs or sides of rocky cliffs, towering ninety to a hundred and fifty feet high. From the west Mesquital meandered across the broad basin, and from the north Locust Creek came down between rock ledge banks and merged with Mesquital in the wide mouth of the V. Then the river thus formed flowed through the narrow gap in the hills to the east. Across the gap the dam had been built.

Once the road to Lost Knob, climbing up from the south, had descended into that basin, crossed Mesquital and led on up into the hills to the north west. But now that road was submerged by foaming water. Directly north of the dam was no road, only a wild expanse of hills and postoak groves. But Reynolds knew he could skirt the edge of the lake and reach the old road on the other side, or better still, strike straight out through the hills, ignoring all roads and using his wire cutters to let him through fences.

His horse snorted and shied violently. Reynolds cursed and clawed at his gun, tucked under his dripping rain coat. He had just reached the other end of the dam, and something was moving in the darkness.

"Stop right where you are!" Some one was splashing toward him. The lightning revealed a man without coat or hat. His hair was plastered to his skull, and water streamed down his sodden garments. His eyes gleamed in the lightning glare.

"Bill Emmett!" exclaimed Reynolds, raising his voice above the thunder of the waters below. "What the devil you doin' here?"

"I'm here on the devil's business!" shouted the other. "What *you* doin' here? Been to Bisley to get bail for John?"

"Bail, hell," answered Reynolds grimly, close to the man. "I killed Saul Hopkins!"

The answer was a shriek that disconcerted him. Emmett gripped his hand and wrung it fiercely. The man seemed strung to an unnatural pitch.

"Good!" he yelled. "But they's more in Bisley than Saul Hopkins."

"I know," replied Reynolds. "I aim to get some of them before I die."

Another shriek of passionate exultation cut weirdly through the lash of the wind and the rain.

"You're the man for me!" Emmett was fumbling with cold fingers over Reynolds' lapels and arms. "I knowed you was the right stuff! Now you listen to me. See that water?" He pointed at the deafening torrent surging and thundering almost under their feet. "Look at it!" he screamed. "Look at it surge and foam and eddy under the lightnin'! See them whirlpools in it! Look at them dead cows and horses whirlin' and bangin' against the dam! Well, I'm goin' to let that through the streets of Bisley! They'll wake up to find the black water foamin' through their windows! It won't be just dead cattle floatin' in the water! It'll be dead men and dead women! I can see 'em now, whirlin' down, down to the Gulf!"

Reynolds gripped the man by the shoulders and shook him savagely. "What you talkin' about?" he roared.

A peal of wild laughter mingled with a crash of thunder. "I mean I got enough dynamite planted under this dam to split it wide open!" Emmett yelled. "I'm goin' to send everybody in Bisley to hell before daylight!"

"You're crazy!" snarled Reynolds, an icy hand clutching his heart.

"Crazy?" screamed the other; and the mad glare in his eyes, limned by the lightning, told Reynolds that he had spoken the grisly truth. "Crazy? You just come from killin' that devil Hopkins, and you turn pale? You're small stuff; you killed one enemy. I aim to kill thousands!

"Look out there where the black water is rollin' and tumblin'. I owned that, once; leastways, I owned land the water has taken now, away over yonder. My father and grandfather owned it before me. And they condemned it and took it away from me, just because Bisley wanted a lake, damn their yellow souls!"

"The county paid you three times what the land was worth," protested Reynolds, his peculiar sense of justice forcing him into defending an enemy.

"Yes!" Again that awful peal of laughter turned Reynolds cold. "Yes! And I put it in a Bisley bank, and the bank went broke! I lost every cent I had in the world. I'm down and out; I got no land and

no money. Damn 'em, oh, damn 'em! Bisley's goin' to pay! I'm goin' to wipe her out! There's enough water out there to fill Locust Valley from ridge to ridge across Bisley. I've waited for this; I've planned for it. Tonight when I seen the lightnin' flickerin' over the ridges, I knew the time was come.

"I ain't hung around here and fed the watchman corn juice for months, just for fun. He's drunk up in his shack now, and the floodgate's closed! I seen to that! My charge is planted – enough to crack the dam – the water'll do the rest. I've stood here all night, watchin' Locust and Mesquital rollin' down like the rivers of Judgment, and now it's time, and I'm goin' to set off the charge!"

"Emmett!" protested Reynolds, shaking with horror. "My God, you can't do this! Think of the women and children –"

"Who thought of mine?" yelled Emmett, his voice cracking in a sob. "My wife had to live like a dog after we lost our home and money; that's why she died. I didn't have enough money to have her took care of. Get out of my way, Reynolds; you're small stuff. You killed one man; I aim to kill thousands."

"Wait!" urged Reynolds desperately. "I hate Bisley as much as anybody – but my God, man, the women and kids ain't got nothin' to do with it! You ain't goin' to do this – you *can't*–" His brain reeled at the picture it evoked. Bisley lay directly in the path of the flood; its business houses stood almost on the banks of Locust Creek. The whole town was built in the bottoms; hundreds would find it impossible to escape in time to the hills, should this awful mountain of black water come roaring down the valley. Reynolds was only an anachronism, not a homicidal maniac.

In the urgency of his determination he dropped the reins of his horse and caught at Emmett. The horse snorted and galloped up the slope and away.

"Let go me, Reynolds!" howled Emmett. "I'll kill you!"

"You'll have to before you set off that charge!" gritted Reynolds.

Emmett screamed like a tree cat. He tore away, came on again, something glinting in his uplifted hand. Swearing, Reynolds fumbled for his gun. The hammer caught in the oilcloth. Emmett caromed against him, screaming and striking. An agonizing pain went

through Reynolds' lifted left arm, another and another; he felt the keen blade rip along his ribs, sink into his shoulder. Emmett was snarling like a wild beast, hacking blindly and madly.

They were down on the brink of the dam, clawing and smiting in the mud and water. Dimly Reynolds realized that he was being stabbed to pieces. He was a powerful man, but he was hampered by his long slicker, exhausted by his ride through the storm, and Emmett was a thing of wires of rawhide, fired by the frenzy of madness.

Reynolds abandoned his attempts to imprison Emmett's knife wrist, and tugged again at his imprisoned gun. It came clear, just as Emmett, with a mad howl, drove his knife full into Reynolds' breast. The madman screamed again as he felt the muzzle jam against him; then the gun thundered, so close between them it burnt the clothing of both. Reynolds was almost deafened by the report. Emmett was thrown clear of him and lay at the rim of the dam, his back broken by the tearing impact of the heavy bullet. His head hung over the edge, his arms trailed down toward the foaming black water which seemed to surge upward for him.

Reynolds essayed to rise, then sank back dizzily. Lightning played before his eyes, thunder rumbled. Beneath him the tumultuous water roared. Somewhere in the blackness there grew a hint of light. Belated dawn was stealing over the postoak hills, bent beneath a cloak of rain.

"Damn!" choked Reynolds, clawing at the mud. Incoherently he cursed; not because death was upon him, but because of the manner of his dying.

"Why couldn't I gone out like I wanted to? – fightin' them I hate – not a friend who'd gone bughouse. Curse the luck! And for them Bisley swine! Anyway –" the wandering voice trailed away – "died with my boots on – like a man ought to die – damn them –"

The blood-stained hands ceased to grope; the figure in the tattered slicker lay still; parting a curtain of falling rain, dawn broke grey and haggard over the postoak country.

OceanofPDF.com

Musings

The little poets sing of little things:
Hope, cheer, and faith, small queens and puppet kings;
Lovers who kissed and then were made as one,
And modest flowers waving in the sun.

The mighty poets write in blood and tears
And agony that, flame-like, bites and sears.
They reach their mad blind hands into the night,
To plumb abysses dead to human sight;
To drag from gulfs where lunacy lies curled,
Mad monstrous nightmare shapes to blast the world.

OceanofPDF.com

Son of the White Wolf

I
The Battle Standard

The commander of the Turkish outpost of El Ashraf was awakened before dawn by the stamp of horses and jingle of accoutrements. He sat up and shouted for his orderly. There was no response, so he rose, hurriedly jerked on his garments, and strode out of the mud hut that served as his headquarters. What he saw rendered him momentarily speechless.

His command was mounted, in full marching formation, drawn up near the railroad that it was their duty to guard. The plain to the left of the track where the tents of the troopers had stood now lay bare. The tents had been loaded on the baggage camels which stood fully packed and ready to move out. The commandant glared wildly, doubting his own senses, until his eyes rested on a flag borne by a trooper. The waving pennant did not display the familiar crescent. The commandant turned pale.

"What does this mean?" he shouted, striding forward. His lieutenant, Osman, glanced at him inscrutably. Osman was a tall man, hard and supple as steel, with a dark keen face.

"Mutiny, *effendi,"* he replied calmly. "We are sick of this war we fight for the Germans. We are sick of Djemal Pasha and those other fools of the Council of Unity and Progress, and, incidentally, of you. So we are going into the hills to build a tribe of our own."

"Madness!" gasped the officer, tugging at his revolver. Even as he drew it, Osman shot him through the head.

The lieutenant sheathed the smoking pistol and turned to the troopers. The ranks were his to a man, won to his wild ambition under the very nose of the officer who now lay there with his brains oozing.

"Listen!" he commanded.

In the tense silence they all heard the low, deep reverberation in the west.

“British guns!” said Osman. “Battering the Turkish Empire to bits! The New Turks have failed. What Asia needs is not a new party, but a new race! There are thousands of fighting men between the Syrian coast and the Persian highlands, ready to be roused by a new word, a new prophet! The East is moving in her sleep. Ours is the duty is to awaken her!

“You have all sworn to follow me into the hills. Let us return to the ways of our pagan ancestors who worshiped the White Wolf on the steppes of High Asia before they bowed to the creed of Mohammed!

“We have reached the end of the Islamic Age. We abjure Allah as a superstition fostered by an epileptic Meccan camel driver. Our people have copied Arab ways too long. But we hundred men are *Turks!* We have burned the Koran. We bow not toward Mecca, nor swear by their false Prophet. And now follow me as we planned – to establish ourselves in a strong position in the hills and to seize Arab women for our wives.”

“Our sons will be half Arab,” someone protested.

“A man is the son of his father,” retorted Osman. “We Turks have always looted the *harims* of the world for our women, but our sons are always Turks.

“Come! We have arms, horses, supplies. If we linger we shall be crushed with the rest of the army between the British on the coast and the Arabs the Englishman Lawrence is bringing up from the south. On to El Awad! The sword for the men – captivity for the women!”

His voice cracked like a whip as he snapped the orders that set the lines in motion. In perfect order they moved off through the lightening dawn toward the range of saw-edged hills in the distance. Behind them the air still vibrated with the distant rumble of the British artillery. Over them waved a banner that bore the head of a white wolf – the battle-standard of most ancient Turan.

II

Massacre

When Fraulein Olga von Bruckmann, known as a famous German secret agent, arrived at the tiny Arab hill-village of El Awad, it was in a drizzling rain that made the dusk a blinding curtain over the muddy town.

With her companion, an Arab named Ahmed, she rode into the muddy street, and the villagers crept from their hovels to stare in awe at the first white woman most of them had ever seen.

A few words from Ahmed and the *shaykh* salaamed and showed her to the best mud hut in the village. The horses were led away to feed and shelter, and Ahmed paused long enough to whisper to his companion:

"El Awad is friendly to the Turks. Have no fear. I shall be near, in any event."

"Try and get fresh horses," she urged. "I must push on as soon as possible."

"The *shaykh* swears there isn't a horse in the village in fit condition to be ridden. He may be lying. But at any rate our own horses will be rested enough to go on by dawn. Even with fresh horses it would be useless to try to go any farther tonight. We'd lose our way among the hills, and in this region there's always the risk of running into Lawrence's Bedouin raiders."

Olga knew that Ahmed knew she carried important secret documents from Baghdad to Damascus, and she knew from experience that she could trust his loyalty. Removing only her dripping cloak and riding boots, she stretched herself on the dingy blankets that served as a bed. She was worn out from the strain of the journey.

She was the first white woman ever to attempt to ride from Baghdad to Damascus. Only the protection accorded a trusted secret agent by the long arm of the German-Turkish government, and her guide's zeal and craft, had brought her thus far in safety.

She fell asleep, thinking of the long weary miles still to be traveled, and even greater dangers, now that she had come into the region where the Arabs were fighting their Turkish masters. The Turks still held the country, that summer of 1917, but lightning-like raids flashed across the desert, blowing up trains, cutting tracks and

butchering the inhabitants of isolated posts. Lawrence was leading the tribes northward, and with him was the mysterious American, *El Borak*, whose name was one to hush children.

She never knew how long she slept, but she awoke suddenly and sat up, in fright and bewilderment. The rain still beat on the roof, but there mingled with it shrieks of pain or fear, yells and the staccato crackling of rifles. She sprang up, lighted a candle and was just pulling on her boots when the door was hurled open violently.

Ahmed reeled in, his dark face livid, blood oozing through the fingers that clutched his breast.

"The village is attacked!" he cried chokingly. "Men in Turkish uniform! There must be some mistake! They know El Awad is friendly! I tried to tell their officer that we are friends, but he shot me! We must get away, quick!"

A shot cracked in the open door behind him and a jet of fire spurted from the blackness. Ahmed groaned and crumpled. Olga cried out in horror, staring wide-eyed at the figure who stood before her. A tall, wiry man in Turkish uniform blocked the door. He was handsome in a dark, hawk-like way, and he eyed her in a manner that brought the blood to her cheeks.

"Why did you kill that man?" she demanded. "He was a trusted servant of your country."

"I have no country," he answered, moving toward her. Outside the firing was dying away and women's voices were lifted piteously. "I go to build one, as my ancestor Osman did."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she retorted. "But unless you provide me with an escort to the nearest post, I shall report you to your superiors, and –"

He laughed wildly at her. "I have no superiors, you little fool! I am an empire builder, I tell you! I have a hundred armed men at my disposal. I'll build a new race in these hills." His eyes blazed as he spoke.

"You're mad!" she exclaimed.

"Mad? It's you who are mad not to recognize the possibilities as I have! This war is bleeding the life out of Europe. When it's over, no

matter who wins, the nations will lie prostrate. Then it will be Asia's turn!

"If Lawrence can build up an Arab army to fight for him, then certainly I, an Ottoman, can build up a kingdom among my own peoples! Thousands of Turkish soldiers have deserted to the British. They and more will desert again to me, when they hear that a Turk is building anew the empire of ancient Turan."

"Do what you like," she answered, believing he had been seized by the madness that often grips men in time of war when the world seems crumbling and any wild dream looks possible. "But at least don't interfere with my mission. If you won't give me an escort, I'll go on alone."

"You'll go with me!" he retorted, looking down at her with hot admiration.

Olga was a handsome girl, tall, slender but supple, with a wealth of unruly golden hair. She was so completely feminine that no disguise would make her look like a man, not even the voluminous robes of an Arab, so she had attempted none. She trusted instead to Ahmed's skill to bring her safely through the desert.

"Do you hear those screams? My men are supplying themselves with wives to bear soldiers for the new empire. Yours shall be the signal honor of being the first to go into Sultan Osman's *seraglio!"*

"You do not dare!" She snatched a pistol from her blouse.

Before she could level it he wrenched it from her with brutal strength.

"Dare!" He laughed at her vain struggles. "What do I not dare? I tell you a new empire is being born tonight! Come with me! There's no time for love-making now. Before dawn we must be on the march for Sulayman's Walls. The star of the White Wolf rises!"

III

The Call of Blood

The sun was not long risen over the saw-edged mountains to the east, but already the heat was glazing the cloudless sky to the hue of white-hot steel. Along the dim road that split the immensity of the

desert a single shape moved. The shape grew out of the heat-hazes of the south and resolved itself into a man on a camel.

The man was no Arab. His boots and khakis, as well as the rifle-butt jutting from beneath his knee, spoke of the West. But with his dark face and hard frame he did not look out of place, even in that fierce land. He was Francis Xavier Gordon, El Borak, whom men loved, feared or hated, according to their political complexion, from the Golden Horn to the headwaters of the Ganges.

He had ridden most of the night, but his iron frame had not yet approached the fringes of weariness. Another mile, and he sighted a yet dimmer trail straggling down from a range of hills to the east. Something was coming along this trail – a crawling something that left a broad dark smear on the hot flints.

Gordon swung his camel into the trail and a moment later bent over the man who lay there gasping stertorously. It was a young Arab, and the breast of his *abba* was soaked in blood.

"Yusef!" Gordon drew back the wet *abba*, glanced at the bared breast, then covered it again. Blood oozed steadily from a blue-rimmed bullet-hole. There was nothing he could do. Already the Arab's eyes were glazing. Gordon stared up the trail, seeing neither horse nor camel anywhere. But the dark smear stained the stones as far as he could see.

"My God, man, how far have you crawled in this condition?"

"An hour – many hours – I do not know!" panted Yusef. "I fainted and fell from the saddle. When I came to I was lying in the trail and my horse was gone. But I knew you would be coming up from the south, so I crawled – crawled! Allah, how hard are thy stones!"

Gordon set a canteen to his lips and Yusef drank noisily, then clutched Gordon's sleeve with clawing fingers.

"El Borak, I am dying and that is no great matter, but there is the matter of vengeance – not for me, *ya sidi*, but for innocent ones. You know I was on furlough to my village, El Awad. I am the only man of El Awad who fights for Arabia. The elders are friendly to the Turks. But last night the Turks burned El Awad! They marched in before midnight and the people welcomed them – while I hid in a shed.

“Then without warning they began slaying! The men of El Awad were unarmed and helpless. I slew one soldier myself. Then they shot me and I dragged myself away – found my horse and rode to tell the tale before I died. Ah, Allah, I have tasted of perdition this night!”

“Did you recognize their officer?” asked Gordon.

“I never saw him before. They called this leader of theirs Osman Pasha. Their flag bore the head of a white wolf. I saw it by the light of the burning huts. My people cried out in vain that they were friends.

“There was a German woman and a man of Hauran who came to El Awad from the east, just at nightfall. I think they were spies. The Turks shot him and took her captive. It was all blood and madness.”

“Mad indeed!” muttered Gordon. Yusef lifted himself on an elbow and groped for him, a desperate urgency in his weakening voice.

“El Borak, I fought well for the Emir Feisal, and for Lawrence *effendi*, and for you! I was at Yenbo, and Wejh, and Akaba. Never have I asked a reward! I ask now: justice and vengeance! Grant me this plea: Slay the Turkish dogs who butchered my people!”

Gordon did not hesitate.

“They shall die,” he answered.

Yusef smiled fiercely, gasped: *“Allaho akbar!”* then sank back dead.

Within the hour Gordon rode eastward. The vultures that had already gathered in the sky with their grisly foreknowledge of death then flapped sullenly away from the cairn of stones he had piled over the dead man, Yusef.

Gordon’s business in the north could wait. One reason for his dominance over the Orientals was the fact that in some ways his nature closely resembled theirs. He not only understood the cry for vengeance, but he sympathized with it. And he always kept his promise.

But he was puzzled. The destruction of a friendly village was not customary, even by the Turks, and certainly they would not ordinarily have mishandled their own spies. If they were deserters

they were acting in an unusual manner, for most deserters made their way to Feisal. And that wolf's head banner?

Gordon knew that certain fanatics in the New Turks party were trying to erase all signs of Arab culture from their civilization. This was an impossible task, since that civilization itself was based on Arabic culture; but he had heard that in Stamboul the radicals even advocated abandoning Islam and reverting to the paganism of their ancestors. But he had never believed the tale.

The sun was sinking over the mountains of Edom when Gordon came to ruined El Awad, in a fold of the bare hills. For hours before he had marked its location by black dots dropping in the blue. That they did not rise again told him that the village was deserted except for the dead.

As he rode into the dusty street, several vultures flapped heavily away. The hot sun had dried the mud, curdled the red pools in the dust. He sat in his saddle a while, staring silently.

He was no stranger to the handiwork of the Turk. He had seen much of it in the long fighting up from Jeddah on the Red Sea. But even so, he felt sick. The bodies lay in the street, headless, disemboweled, hewn asunder – bodies of children, old women and men. A red mist floated before his eyes, so that for a moment the landscape seemed to swim in blood. The slayers were gone, but they had left a plain road for him to follow.

What the signs they had left did not show him, he guessed. The slayers had loaded their female captives on baggage camels, and had gone eastward, deeper into the hills. Why they were following that road he could not guess, but he knew where it led – to the long-abandoned Walls of Sulayman, by way of the Well of Achmet.

Without hesitation he followed. He had not gone many miles before he passed more of their work – a baby, its brains oozing from its broken head. Some kidnaped woman had hidden her child in her robes until it had been wrenched from her and brained on the rocks, before her eyes.

The country became wilder as he went. He did not halt to eat, but munched dried dates from his pouch as he rode. He did not waste

time worrying over the recklessness of his action – one lone American dogging the crimson trail of a Turkish raiding party.

He had no plan; his future actions would depend on the circumstances that arose. But he had taken the death-trail and he would not turn back while he lived. He was no more foolhardy than his grandfather who single-handed trailed an Apache war-party for days through the Guadalupes and returned to the settlement on the Pecos with scalps hanging from his belt.

The sun had set and dusk was closing in when Gordon topped a ridge and looked down on the plain whereon stands the Well of Achmet with its straggling palm grove. To the right of that cluster stood the tents, horse lines and camel lines of a well-ordered force. To the left stood a hut used by travelers as a *khan*. The door was shut and a sentry stood before it. While he watched, a man came from the tents with a bowl of food which he handed in at the door.

Gordon could not see the occupant, but he believed it was the German girl of whom Yusef had spoken, though why they should imprison one of their own spies was one of the mysteries of this strange affair. He saw their flag, and could make out a splotch of white that must be the wolf's head. He saw, too, the Arab women, thirty-five or forty of them herded into a pen improvised from bales and pack-saddles. They crouched together dumbly, dazed by their misfortunes.

He had hidden his camel below the ridge, on the western slope, and he lay concealed behind a clump of stunted bushes until night had fallen. Then he slipped down the slope, circling wide to avoid the mounted patrol, which rode leisurely about the camp. He lay prone behind a boulder till it had passed, then rose and stole toward the hut. Fires twinkled in the darkness beneath the palms, and he heard the wailing of the captive women.

The sentry before the door of the hut did not see the cat-footed shadow that glided up to the rear wall. As Gordon drew close he heard voices within. They spoke in Turkish.

One window was in the back wall. Strips of wood had been fastened over it, to serve as both pane and bars. Peering between them, Gordon saw a slender girl in a travel-worn riding habit standing before a dark-faced man in a Turkish uniform. There was no insignia to show what his rank had been. The Turk played with a riding whip and his eyes gleamed with cruelty in the light of a candle on a camp table.

“What do I care for the information you bring from Baghdad?” he was demanding. “Neither Turkey nor Germany means anything to me. But it seems you fail to realize your own position. It is mine to command, yours to obey! You are my prisoner, my captive, my slave! It’s time you learned what that means. And the best teacher I know is the whip!”

He fairly spat the last word at her and she paled.

“You dare not subject me to this indignity!” she whispered weakly.

Gordon knew this man must be Osman Pasha. He drew his heavy automatic from its scabbard under his armpit and aimed at the Turk’s breast through the crack in the window. But even as his finger closed on the trigger he changed his mind. There was the sentry at the door, and a hundred other armed men, within hearing, whom the sound of a shot would bring on the run. He grasped the window bars and braced his legs.

“I see I must dispel your illusions,” muttered Osman, moving toward the girl who cowered back until the wall stopped her. Her face was white. She had dealt with many dangerous men in her hazardous career, and she was not easily frightened. But she had never met a man like Osman. His face was a terrifying mask of cruelty; the ferocity that gloats over the agony of a weaker thing shone in his eyes.

Suddenly he had her by the hair, dragging her to him, laughing at her scream of pain. Just then Gordon ripped the strips off the window. The snapping of the wood sounded loud as a gun-shot and Osman wheeled, drawing his pistol, as Gordon came through the window.

The American hit on his feet, leveled automatic checking Osman’s move. The Turk froze, his pistol lifted shoulder high, muzzle pointing at the roof. Outside the sentry called anxiously.

“Answer him!” grated Gordon below his breath. “Tell him everything is all right. And drop that gun!”

The pistol fell to the floor and the girl snatched it up.

“Come here, *Fraulein!”*

She ran to him, but in her haste she crossed the line of fire. In that fleeting moment when her body shielded his, Osman acted. He kicked the table and the candle toppled and went out, and simultaneously he dived for the floor. Gordon's pistol roared deafeningly just as the hut was plunged into darkness. The next instant the door crashed inward and the sentry bulked against the starlight, to crumple as Gordon's gun crashed again and yet again.

With a sweep of his arm, Gordon found the girl and drew her toward the window. He lifted her through as if she had been a child, and climbed through after her. He did not know whether his blind slug had struck Osman or not. The man was crouching silently in the darkness, but there was no time to strike a match and see whether he was living or dead. But as they ran across the shadowy plain, they heard Osman's voice lifted in passion.

By the time they reached the crest of the ridge the girl was winded. Only Gordon's arm about her waist, half dragging, half carrying her, enabled her to make the last few yards of the steep incline. The plain below them was alive with torches and shouting men. Osman was yelling for them to run down the fugitives, and his voice came faintly to them on the ridge.

"Take them alive, curse you! Scatter and find them! It's El Borak!" An instant later he was yelling, with an edge of panic in his voice: "Wait. Come back! Take cover and make ready to repel an attack! He may have a horde of Arabs with him!"

"He thinks first of his own desire, and only later of the safety of his men," muttered Gordon. "I don't think he'll ever get very far. Come on."

He led the way to the camel, helped the girl into the saddle, then leaped up himself. A word, a tap of the camel wand, and the beast ambled silently off down the slope.

"I know Osman caught you at El Awad," said Gordon. "But what's he up to? What's his game?"

"He was a lieutenant stationed at El Ashraf," she answered. "He persuaded his company to mutiny, kill their commander and desert.

He plans to fortify the Walls of Sulayman, and build a new empire. I thought at first he was mad, but he isn't. He's a devil."

"The Walls of Sulayman?" Gordon checked his mount and sat for a moment motionless in the starlight.

"Are you game for an all-night ride?" he asked presently.

"Anywhere! As long as it is far away from Osman!" There was a hint of hysteria in her voice.

"I doubt if your escape will change his plans. He'll probably lie about Achmet all night under arms, expecting an attack. In the morning he will decide that I was alone, and pull out for the Walls.

"Well, I happen to know that an Arab force is there, waiting for an order from Lawrence to move on to Ageyli. Three hundred Juheina camel-riders, sworn to Feisal. Enough to eat Osman's gang. Lawrence's messenger should reach them some time between dawn and noon. There is a chance we can get there before the Juheina pull out. If we can, we'll turn them on Osman and wipe him out, with his whole pack.

"It won't upset Lawrence's plans for the Juheina to get to Ageyli a day late, and Osman must be destroyed. He's a mad dog running loose."

"His ambition sounds mad," she murmured. "But when he speaks of it, with his eyes blazing, it's easy to believe he might even succeed."

"You forget that crazier things have happened in the desert," he answered, as he swung the camel eastward. "The world is being made over here, as well as in Europe. There's no telling what damage this Osman might do, if left to himself. The Turkish Empire is falling to pieces, and new empires *have* risen out of the ruins of old ones.

"But if we can get to Sulayman before the Juheina march, we'll check him. If we find them gone, we'll be in a pickle ourselves. It's a gamble, our lives against his. Are you game?"

"Till the last card falls!" she retorted. His face was a blur in the starlight, but she sensed rather than saw his grim smile of approval.

The camel's hoofs made no sound as they dropped down the slope and circled far wide of the Turkish camp. Like ghosts on a ghost-

camel they moved across the plain under the stars. A faint breeze stirred the girl's hair. Not until the fires were dim behind them and they were again climbing a hill-road did she speak.

"I know you. You're the American they call El Borak, the Swift. You came down from Afghanistan when the war began. You were with King Hussein even before Lawrence came over from Egypt. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"Then what's my status?" she asked. "Have you rescued me or captured me? Am I a prisoner?"

"Let us say companion, for the time being," he suggested. "We're up against a common enemy. No reason why we shouldn't make common cause, is there?"

"None!" she agreed, and leaning her blond head against his hard shoulder, she went soundly to sleep.

A gaunt moon rose, pushing back the horizons, flooding craggy slopes and dusty plains with leprous silver. The vastness of the desert seemed to mock the tiny figures on their tiring camel, as they rode blindly on toward what Fate they could not guess.

IV

Wolves of the Desert

Olga awoke as dawn was breaking. She was cold and stiff, in spite of the cloak Gordon had wrapped about her, and she was hungry. They were riding through a dry gorge with rock-strewn slopes rising on either hand, and the camel's gait had become a lurching walk. Gordon halted it, slid off without making it kneel, and took its rope.

"It's about done, but the Walls aren't far ahead. Plenty of water there – food, too, if the Juheina are still there. There are dates in that pouch."

If he felt the strain of fatigue he did not show it as he strode along at the camel's head. Olga rubbed her chill hands and wished for sunrise.

"The Well of Harith," Gordon indicated a walled enclosure ahead of them. "The Turks built that wall, years ago, when the Walls of

Sulayman were an army post. Later they abandoned both positions."

The wall, built of rocks and dried mud, was in good shape, and inside the enclosure there was a partly ruined hut. The well was shallow, with a mere trickle of water at the bottom.

"I'd better get off and walk too," Olga suggested.

"These flints would cut your boots and feet to pieces. It's not far now. Then the camel can rest all it needs."

"And if the Juheina aren't there –" She left the sentence unfinished. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe Osman won't come up before the camel's rested."

"I believe he'll make a forced march," she said, not fearfully, but calmly stating an opinion. "His beasts are good. If he drives them hard, he can get here before midnight. Our camel won't be rested enough to carry us, by that time. And we couldn't get away on foot, in this desert."

He laughed, and respecting her courage, did not try to make light of their position.

"Well," he said quietly, "let's hope the Juheina are still there!"

If they were not, she and Gordon were caught in a trap of hostile, waterless desert, fanged with the long guns of predatory tribesmen.

Three miles further east the valley narrowed and the floor pitched upward, dotted by dry shrubs and boulders. Gordon pointed suddenly to a faint ribbon of smoke feathering up into the sky.

"Look! The Juheina are there!"

Olga gave a deep sigh of relief. Only then did she realize how desperately she had been hoping for some such sign. She felt like shaking a triumphant fist at the rocky waste about her, as if at a sentient enemy, sullen and cheated of its prey.

Another mile and they topped a ridge and saw a large enclosure surrounding a cluster of wells. There were Arabs squatting about their tiny cooking fires. As the travelers came suddenly into view within a few hundred yards of them, the Bedouins sprang up, shouting. Gordon drew his breath suddenly between clenched teeth.

"They are not Juheina! They're Rualla! Allies of the Turks!"

Too late to retreat. A hundred and fifty wild men were on their feet, glaring, rifles cocked.

Gordon did the next best thing and went leisurely toward them. To look at him one would have thought that he had expected to meet these men here, and anticipated nothing but a friendly greeting. Olga tried to imitate his tranquility, but she knew their lives hung on the crook of a trigger finger. These men were supposed to be her allies, but her recent experience made her distrust Orientals. The sight of these hundreds of wolfish faces filled her with sick dread.

They were hesitating, rifles lifted, nervous and uncertain as surprised wolves, then:

"Allah!" howled a tall, scarred warrior. "It is El Borak!"

Olga caught her breath as she saw the man's finger quiver on his rifletrigger. Only a racial urge to gloat over his victim kept him from shooting the American, then and there.

"El Borak!" The shout was a wave that swept the throng.

Ignoring the clamor, the menacing rifles, Gordon made the camel kneel and lifted Olga off. She tried, with fair success, to conceal her fear of the wild figures that crowded about them, but her flesh crawled at the blood-lust burning redly in each wolfish eye.

Gordon's rifle was in its boot on the saddle, and his pistol was out of sight, under his shirt. He was careful not to reach for the rifle – a move which would have brought a hail of bullets – but having helped the girl down, he turned and faced the crowd casually, his hands empty. Running his glance over the fierce faces, he singled out a tall stately man in the rich garb of a *shaykh*, who was standing somewhat apart.

"You keep poor watch, Mitkhal ibn Ali," said Gordon. "If I had been a raider your men would be lying in their blood by this time."

Before the *shaykh* could answer, the man who had first recognized Gordon thrust himself violently forward, his face convulsed with hate.

"You expected to find friends here, El Borak!" he exulted. "But you come too late! Three hundred Juheina dogs rode north an hour before dawn! We saw them go, and came up after they had gone.

Had they known of your coming, perhaps they would have stayed to welcome you!"

"It's not to you I speak, Zangi Khan, you Kurdish dog," retorted Gordon contemptuously, "but to the Rualla – honorable men and fair foes!"

Zangi Khan snarled like a wolf and threw up his rifle, but a lean Bedouin caught his arm.

"Wait!" he growled. "Let El Borak speak. His words are not wind."

A rumble of approval came from the Arabs. Gordon had touched their fierce pride and vanity. That would not save his life, but they were willing to listen to him before they killed him.

"If you listen, he will trick you with cunning words!" shouted the angered Zangi Khan furiously. "Slay him now, before he can do us harm!"

"Is Zangi Khan *shaykh* of the Rualla that he gives commands while Mitkhal stands silent?" asked Gordon with biting irony.

Mitkhal reacted to his taunt exactly as Gordon knew he would.

"Let El Borak speak!" he ordered. "I command here, Zangi Khan! Do not forget that."

"I do not forget, *ya sidi,"* the Kurd assured him, but his eyes burned red at the rebuke. "I but spoke in zeal for your safety."

Mitkhal gave him a slow, searching glance which told Gordon that there was no love lost between the two men. Zangi Khan's reputation as a fighting man meant much to the younger warriors. Mitkhal was more fox than wolf, and he evidently feared the Kurd's influence over his men. As an agent of the Turkish government Zangi's authority was theoretically equal to Mitkhal's. Actually this amounted to little, for Mitkhal's tribesmen took orders from their *shaykh* only. But it put Zangi in a position to use his personal talents to gain an ascendancy – an ascendancy Mitkhal feared would relegate him to a minor position.

"Speak, El Borak," ordered Mitkhal. "But speak swiftly. It may be," he added, "Allah's will that the moments of your life are few."

“Death marches from the west,” said Gordon abruptly. “Last night a hundred Turkish deserters butchered the people of El Awad.”

“Wallah!” swore a tribesman. “El Awad was friendly to the Turks!”

“A lie!” cried Zangi Khan. “Or if true, the dogs of deserters slew the people to curry favor with Feisal.”

“When did men come to Feisal with the blood of children on their hands?” retorted Gordon. “They have foresworn Islam and worship the White Wolf. They carried off the young women and the old women, the men and the children they slew like dogs.”

A murmur of anger rose from the Arabs. The Bedouins had a rigid code of warfare, and they did not kill women or children. It was the unwritten law of the desert, old when Abraham came up out of Chaldea.

But Zangi Khan cried out in angry derision, blind to the resentful looks cast at him. He did not understand that particular phase of the Bedouins’ code, for his people had no such inhibition. Kurds in war killed women as well as men.

“What are the women of El Awad to us?” he sneered. “Your heart I know already,” answered Gordon with icy contempt. “It is to the Rualla that I speak.”

“A trick!” howled the Kurd. “A lie to trick us!”

“It is no lie!” Olga stepped forward boldly. “Zangi Khan, you know that I am an agent of the German government. Osman Pasha, leader of these renegades, burned El Awad last night, as El Borak has said. Osman murdered Ahmed ibn Shalaan, my guide, among others. He is as much our enemy as he is an enemy of the British.”

She looked to Mitkhal for help, but the *shaykh* stood apart, like an actor watching a play in which he has not yet received his cue.

“What if it is the truth?” Zangi Khan snarled, muddled by his hate and fear of El Borak’s cunning. “What is El Awad to us?”

Gordon caught him up instantly.

“This Kurd asks what is the destruction of a friendly village! Doubtless, naught to him! But what does it mean to you, who have left your herds and families unguarded? If you let this pack of mad

dogs range the land, how can you be sure of the safety of your wives and children?"

"What would you have, El Borak?" demanded a grey-bearded raider.

"Trap these Turks and destroy them. I'll show you how."

It was then that Zangi Khan lost his head completely.

"Heed him not!" he screamed. "Within the hour we must ride northward! The Turks will give us ten thousand British pounds for his head!"

Avarice burned briefly in the men's eyes, to be dimmed by the reflection that the reward offered for El Borak's head would be claimed by the *shaykh* and Zangi. They made no move and Mitkhal stood aside with an air of watching a contest that did not concern himself.

"Take his head!" screamed Zangi, sensing hostility at last, and thrown into a panic by it.

His demoralization was completed by Gordon's taunting laugh.

"You seem to be the only one who wants my head, Zangi! Perhaps you can take it!"

Zangi howled incoherently, his eyes glaring red, then threw up his rifle, hip-high. Just as the muzzle came up, Gordon's automatic crashed thunderously. He had drawn so swiftly not a man there had followed his motion. Zangi Khan reeled back under the impact of hot lead, toppled sideways and lay still.

In an instant, a hundred cocked rifles covered Gordon. Confused by varying emotions, the men hesitated for the fleeting instant it took Mitkhal to shout:

"Hold! Do not shoot!"

He strode forward with the air of a man ready to take the center of the stage at last, but he could not disguise the gleam of satisfaction in his shrewd eyes.

"No man here is kin to Zangi Khan," he said offhandedly. "There is no cause for blood feud. He had eaten the salt, but he attacked our prisoner, whom he thought unarmed."

He held out his hand for the pistol, but Gordon did not surrender it.

“I’m not your prisoner,” said he. “I could kill you before your men could lift a finger. But I didn’t come here to fight you. I came asking aid to avenge the children and women of my enemies. I risk my life for your families. Are you dogs, to do less?”

The question hung in the air unanswered, but he had struck the right chord in their barbaric bosoms, that were always ready to respond to some wild deed of reckless chivalry. Their eyes glowed and they looked at their *shaykh* expectantly.

Mitkhal was a shrewd politician. The butchery at El Awad meant much less to him than it meant to his younger warriors. He had associated with so-called civilized men long enough to lose much of his primitive integrity. But he always followed the side of public opinion, and was shrewd enough to lead a movement he could not check. Yet, he was not to be stampeded into a hazardous adventure.

“These Turks may be too strong for us,” he objected.

“I’ll show you how to destroy them with little risk,” answered Gordon. “But there must be covenants between us, Mitkhal.”

“These Turks must be destroyed,” said Mitkhal, and he spoke sincerely there, at least. “But there are too many blood feuds between us, El Borak, for us to let you get out of our hands.”

Gordon laughed.

“You can’t whip the Turks without my help and you know it. Ask your young men what they desire!”

“Let El Borak lead us!” shouted a young warrior instantly. A murmur of approval paid tribute to Gordon’s widespread reputation as a strategist.

“Very well!” Mitkhal took the tide. “Let there be truce between us – with conditions! Lead us against the Turks. If you win, you and the woman shall go free. If we lose, we take your head!”

Gordon nodded, and the warriors yelled in glee. It was just the sort of a bargain that appealed to their minds, and Gordon knew it was the best he could make.

“Bring bread and salt!” ordered Mitkhal, and a giant black slave moved to do his bidding. “Until the battle is lost or won there is

truce between us, and no Rualla shall harm you, unless you spill Rualla blood."

Then he thought of something else and his brow darkened as he thundered:

"Where is the man who watched from the ridge?"

A terrified youth was pushed forward. He was a member of a small tribe tributary to the more important Rualla.

"Oh, *shaykh,"* he faltered, "I was hungry and stole away to a fire for meat –"

"Dog!" Mitkhal struck him in the face. "Death is thy portion for failing in thy duty."

"Wait!" Gordon interposed. "Would you question the will of Allah? If the boy had not deserted his post he would have seen us coming up the valley, and your men would have fired on us and killed us. Then you would not have been warned of the Turks, and would have fallen prey to them before discovering they were enemies. Let him go and give thanks to Allah Who sees all!"

It was the sort of sophistry that appeals to the Arab mind. Even Mitkhal was impressed.

"Who knows the mind of Allah?" he conceded. "Live, Musa, but next time perform the will of Allah with vigilance and a mind to orders. And now, El Borak, let us discuss battle-plans while food is prepared."

V

Treachery

It was not yet noon when Gordon halted the Rualla beside the Well of Harith. Scouts sent westward reported no sign of the Turks, and the Arabs went forward with the plans made before leaving the Walls – plans outlined by Gordon and agreed to by Mitkhal. First the tribesmen began gathering rocks and hurling them into the well.

"The water's still beneath," Gordon remarked to Olga. "But it'll take hours of hard work to clean out the well so that anybody can get to it. The Turks can't do it under our rifles. If we win, we'll clean it out ourselves, so the next travelers won't suffer."

“Why not take refuge in the *sangar* ourselves?” she asked.

“Too much of a trap. That’s what we’re using it for. We’d have no chance with them in open fight, and if we laid an ambush out in the valley, they’d simply fight their way through us. But when a man’s shot at in the open, his first instinct is to make for the nearest cover. So I’m hoping to trick them into going into the *sangar*. Then we’ll bottle them up and pick them off at our leisure. Without water they can’t hold out long. We shouldn’t lose a dozen men, if any.”

“It seems strange to see you solicitous about the lives of these Rualla, who are your enemies, after all,” she laughed.

“Instinct, maybe. No man fit to lead men wants to lose any more of them than he can help. Just now these men are my allies, and it’s up to me to protect them as well as I can. I’ll admit I’d rather be fighting with the Juheina. Feisal’s messenger must have started for the Walls hours before I supposed he would.”

“And if the Turks surrender, what then?”

“I’ll try to get them to Lawrence – all but Osman Pasha.” Gordon’s face darkened. “That man hangs if he falls into my hands.”

“How will you get them to Lawrence? The Rualla won’t take them.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. But let’s catch our hare before we start broiling him. Osman may whip the daylights out of us.”

“It means your head if he does,” she warned with a shudder.

“Well, it’s worth ten thousand pounds to the Turks,” he laughed, and he moved to inspect the partly ruined hut. Olga followed him.

Mitkhal, directing the blocking of the well, glanced sharply at them, then noted that a number of men were between them and the gate, and turned back to his overseeing.

“Hsss, El Borak!” It was a tense whisper, just as Gordon and Olga turned to leave the hut. An instant later they located a tousled head thrust up from behind a heap of rubble. It was the boy Musa, who obviously had slipped into the hut through a crevice in the back wall.

“Watch from the door and warn me if you see anybody coming,” Gordon muttered to Olga. “This lad must have something to tell.”

“I have, *effendi!”* The boy was trembling with excitement. “I overheard the *shaykh* talking secretly to his black slave, Hassan. I saw them walk away among the palms while you and the woman were eating, at the Walls, and I crept after them, for I feared they meant you mischief – and you saved my life.

“El Borak, listen! Mitkhal means to slay you, whether you win this battle for him or not! He was glad you slew the Kurd, and he is glad to have your aid in wiping out these Turks. But he lusts for the gold the other Turks will pay for your head. Yet he dares not break his word and the covenant of the salt openly. So, if we win the battle, Hassan is to shoot you, and swear you fell by a Turkish bullet!”

The boy rushed on with his story:

“Then Mitkhal will say to the people: ‘El Borak was our guest and ate our salt. But now he is dead, through no fault of ours, and there is no use wasting the reward. So we will take off his head and take it to Damascus and the Turks will give us ten thousand pounds.’ ”

Gordon smiled grimly at Olga’s horror. That was typical Arab logic.

“It didn’t occur to Mitkhal that Hassan might miss his first shot and not get a chance to shoot again, I suppose?” he suggested.

“Oh, yes, *effendi,* Mitkhal thinks of everything. If you kill Hassan, Mitkhal will swear you broke the covenant yourself, by spilling the blood of a Rualla, or a Rualla’s servant, which is the same thing, and will feel free to order you beheaded.”

There was genuine humor in Gordon’s laugh.

“Thanks, Musa! If I saved your life, you’ve paid me back. Better get out now, before somebody sees you talking to us.”

“What shall we do?” exclaimed Olga, pale to the lips.

“You’re in no danger,” he assured her.

She colored angrily.

“I wasn’t thinking of that! Do you think I have less gratitude than that Arab boy? That *shaykh* means to murder you, don’t you understand? Let’s steal camels and run for it!”

“Run where? If we did, they’d be on our heels in no time, deciding I’d lied to them about everything. Anyway, we wouldn’t have a chance. They’re watching us too closely. Besides, I wouldn’t run if I could. I started to wipe out Osman Pasha, and this is the best chance I see to do it. Come on. Let’s get out in the *sangar* before Mitkhal gets suspicious.”

As soon as the well was blocked the men retired to the hillsides. Their camels were hidden behind the ridges, and the men crouched behind rocks and among the stunted shrubs along the slopes. Olga refused Gordon’s offer to send her with an escort back to the Walls, and stayed with him taking up a position behind a rock, Osman’s pistol in her belt. They lay flat on the ground and the heat of the sun-baked flints seeped through their garments.

Once she turned her head, and shuddered to see the blank black countenance of Hassan regarding them from some bushes a few yards behind them. The black slave, who knew no law but his master’s command, was determined not to let Gordon out of his sight.

She spoke of this in a low whisper to the American.

“Sure,” he murmured. “I saw him. But he won’t shoot till he knows which way the fight’s going, and is sure none of the men are looking.”

Olga’s flesh crawled in anticipation of more horrors. If they lost the fight the enraged Ruallas would tear Gordon to pieces, supposing he survived the encounter. If they won, his reward would be a treacherous bullet in the back.

The hours dragged slowly by. Not a flutter of cloth, no lifting of an impatient head betrayed the presence of the wild men on the slopes. Olga began to feel her nerves quiver. Doubts and forebodings gnawed maddeningly at her.

“We took position too soon! The men will lose patience. Osman can’t get here before midnight. It took us all night to reach the Well.”

“Bedouins never lose patience when they smell loot,” he answered. “I believe Osman will get here before sundown. We made poor time on a tiring camel for the last few hours of that ride. I believe Osman broke camp before dawn and pushed hard.”

Another thought came to torture her.

“Suppose he doesn’t come at all? Suppose he has changed his plans and gone somewhere else? The Rualla will believe you lied to them!”

“Look!”

The sun hung low in the west, a fiery, dazzling ball. She blinked, shading her eyes.

Then the head of a marching column grew out of the dancing heat waves: lines of horsemen, grey with dust, files of heavily-laden baggage camels, with the captive women riding them. The standard hung loose in the breathless air; but once, when a vagrant gust of wind, hot as the breath of perdition, lifted the folds, the white wolf’s head was displayed.

Crushing proof of idolatry and heresy! In their agitation the Rualla almost betrayed themselves. Even Mitkhal turned pale.

“Allah! Sacrilege! Forgotten of God. Hell shall be thy portion!”

“Easy!” hissed Gordon, feeling the semi-hysteria that ran down the lurking lines. “Wait for my signal. They may halt to water their camels at the Well.”

Osman must have driven his people like a fiend all day. The women drooped on the loaded camels; the dust-caked faces of the soldiers were drawn. The horses reeled with weariness. But it was soon evident that they did not intend halting at the Well with their goal, the Walls of Sulayman, so near. The head of the column was even with the *sangar* when Gordon fired. He was aiming at Osman, but the range was long, the sun-glare on the rocks dazzling. The man behind Osman fell, and at the signal the slopes came alive with spurting flame.

The column staggered. Horses and men went down and stunned soldiers gave back a ragged fire that did no harm. They did not even see their assailants save as bits of white cloth bobbing among the boulders.

Perhaps discipline had grown lax during the grind of that merciless march. Perhaps panic seized the tired Turks. At any rate the column broke and men fled toward the *sangar* without waiting for orders. They would have abandoned the baggage camels had not Osman ridden among them. Cursing and striking with the flat of his saber, he made them drive the beasts in with them.

“I hoped they’d leave the camels and women outside,” grunted Gordon. “Maybe they’ll drive them out when they find there’s no water.”

The Turks took their positions in good order, dismounting and ranging along the wall. Some dragged the Arab women off the camels and drove them into the hut. Others improvised a pen for the animals with stakes and ropes between the back of the hut and the wall. Saddles were piled in the gate to complete the barricade.

The Arabs yelled taunts as they poured in a hail of lead, and a few leaped up and danced derisively, waving their rifles. But they stopped that when a Turk drilled one of them cleanly through the

head. When the demonstrations ceased, the besiegers offered scanty targets to shoot at.

However, the Turks fired back frugally and with no indication of panic, now that they were under cover and fighting the sort of a fight they understood. They were well protected by the wall from the men directly in front of them, but those facing north could be seen by the men on the south ridge, and vice versa. But the distance was too great for consistently effective shooting at these marks by the Arabs.

“We don’t seem to be doing much damage,” remarked Olga presently.

“Thirst will win for us,” Gordon answered. “All we’ve got to do is to keep them bottled up. They probably have enough water in their canteens to last through the rest of the day. Certainly no longer. Look, they’re going to the well now.”

The well stood in the middle of the enclosure, in a comparatively exposed area, as seen from above. Olga saw men approaching it with canteens in their hands, and the Arabs, with sardonic enjoyment, refrained from firing at them. They reached the well, and then the girl saw the change that came over them. It ran through their band like an electric shock. The men along the walls reacted by firing wildly. A furious yelling rose, edged with hysteria, and men began to run madly about the enclosure. Some toppled, hit by shots dropping from the ridges.

“What are they doing?” Olga started to her knees, and was instantly jerked down again by Gordon. The Turks were running into the hut. If she had been watching Gordon she would have sensed the meaning of it, for his dark face grew suddenly grim.

“They’re dragging the women out!” she exclaimed. “I see Osman waving his saber. What? Oh, God! They’re butchering the women!”

Above the crackle of shots rose terrible shrieks and the sickening *chack* of savagely driven blows. Olga turned sick and hid her face. Osman had realized the trap into which he had been driven, and his reaction was that of a mad dog. Recognizing defeat in the blocked well, facing the ruin of his crazy ambitions by thirst and Bedouin bullets, he was taking this vengeance on the whole Arab race.

On all sides the Arabs rose howling, driven to frenzy by the sight of that slaughter. That these women were of another tribe made no difference. A stern chivalry was the foundation of their society, just as it was among the frontiersmen of early America. There was no sentimentalism about it. It was real and vital as life itself.

The Rualla went berserk when they saw women of their race falling under the swords of the Turks. A wild yell shattered the brazen sky, and recklessly breaking cover, the Arabs pelted down the slopes, howling like fiends. Gordon could not check them, nor could Mitkhal. Their shouts fell on deaf ears. The walls vomited smoke and flame as withering volleys raked the oncoming hordes. Dozens fell, but enough were left to reach the wall and sweep over it in a wave that neither lead nor steel could halt.

And Gordon was among them. When he saw he could not stop the storm he joined it. Mitkhal was not far behind him, cursing his men as he ran. The *shaykh* had no stomach for this kind of fighting, but his leadership was at stake. No man who hung back in this charge would ever be able to command the Rualla again.

Gordon was among the first to reach the wall, leaping over the writhing bodies of half a dozen Arabs. He had not blazed away wildly as he ran like the Bedouins, to reach the wall with an empty gun. He held his fire until the flame spurts from the barrier were almost burning his face, and then emptied his rifle in a point-blank fusilade that left a bloody gap where there had been a line of fierce dark faces an instant before. Before the gap could be closed he had swarmed over and in, and the Rualla poured after him.

As his feet hit the ground a rush of men knocked him against the wall and a blade, thrusting for his life, broke against the rocks. He drove his shortened butt into a snarling face, splintering teeth and bones, and the next instant a surge of his own men over the wall cleared a space about him. He threw away his broken rifle and drew his pistol.

The Turks had been forced back from the wall in a dozen places now, and men were fighting all over the *sangar*. No quarter was

asked – none given. The pitiful headless bodies sprawled before the blood-stained hut had turned the Bedouins into hot-eyed demons. The guns were empty now, all but Gordon's automatic. The yells had died down to grunts, punctuated by death-howls. Above these sounds rose the chopping impact of flailing blades, the crunch of fiercely driven rifle butts. So grimly had the Bedouins suffered in that brainless rush, that now they were outnumbered, and the Turks fought with the fury of desperation.

It was Gordon's automatic, perhaps, that tipped the balance. He emptied it without haste and without hesitation, and at that range he could not miss. He was aware of a dark shadow forever behind him, and turned once to see black Hassan following him, smiting methodically right and left with a heavy scimitar already dripping crimson. Even in the fury of strife, Gordon grinned. The literal-minded Soudanese was obeying instructions to keep at El Borak's heels. As long as the battle hung in doubt, he was Gordon's protector – ready to become his executioner the instant the tide turned in their favor.

"Faithful servant," called Gordon sardonically. "Have care lest these Turks cheat you of my head!"

Hassan grinned, speechless. Suddenly blood burst from his thick lips and he buckled at the knees. Somewhere in that rush down the hill his black body had stopped a bullet. As he struggled on all fours a Turk ran in from the side and brained him with a rifle-butt. Gordon killed the Turk with his last bullet. He felt no grudge against Hassan. The man had been a good soldier, and had obeyed orders given him.

The *sangar* was a shambles. The men on their feet were less than those on the ground, and all were streaming blood. The white wolf standard had been torn from its staff and lay trampled under vengeful feet. Gordon bent, picked up a saber and looked about for Osman. He saw Mitkhal, running toward the horse-pen, and then he yelled a warning, for he saw Osman.

The man broke away from a group of struggling figures and ran for the pen. He tore away the ropes and the horses, frantic from the noise and smell of blood, stampeded into the *sangar*, knocking men

down and trampling them. As they thundered past, Osman, with a magnificent display of agility, caught a handful of flying mane and leaped on the back of the racing steed.

Mitkhal ran toward him, yelling furiously, and snapping a pistol at him. The *shaykh*, in the confusion of the fighting, did not seem to be aware that the gun was empty, for he pulled the trigger again and again as he stood in the path of the oncoming rider. Only at the last moment did he realize his peril and leap back. Even so, he would have sprung clear had not his sandal heel caught in a dead man's *abba*.

Mitkhal stumbled, avoided the lashing hoofs, but not the down-flailing saber in Osman's hand. A wild cry went up from the Rualla as Mitkhal fell, his turban suddenly crimson. The next instant Osman was out of the gate and riding like the wind – straight up the hillside to where he saw the slim figure of the girl to whom he now attributed his overthrow.

Olga had come out from behind the rocks and was standing in stunned horror watching the fight below. Now she awoke suddenly to her own peril at the sight of the madman charging up the slope. She drew the pistol Gordon had taken from him and opened fire. She was not a very good shot. Three bullets missed, the fourth killed the horse, and then the gun jammed. Gordon was running up the slope as the Apaches of his native Southwest run, and behind him streamed a swarm of Rualla. There was not a loaded gun in the whole horde.

Osman took a shocking fall when his horse turned a somersault under him, but rose, bruised and bloody, with Gordon still some distance away. But the Turk had to play hide-and-seek for a few moments among the rocks with his prey before he was able to grasp her hair and twist her screaming to her knees, and then he paused an instant to enjoy her despair and terror. That pause was his undoing.

As he lifted his saber to strike off her head, steel clanged loud on steel. A numbing shock ran through his arm, and his blade was knocked from his hand. His weapon rang on the hot flints. He whirled to face the blazing slits that were El Borak's eyes. The

muscles stood out in cords and ridges on Gordon's sun-burnt forearm in the intensity of his passion.

"Pick it up, you filthy dog," he said between his teeth.

Osman hesitated, stooped, caught up the saber and slashed at Gordon's legs without straightening. Gordon leaped back, then sprang in again the instant his toes touched the earth. His return was as paralyzingly quick as the death-leap of a wolf. It caught Osman off balance, his sword extended. Gordon's blade hissed as it cut the air, slicing through flesh, gritting through bone.

The Turk's head toppled from the severed neck and fell at Gordon's feet, the headless body collapsing in a heap. With an excess spasm of hate, Gordon kicked the head savagely down the slope.

"Oh!" Olga turned away and hid her face. But the girl knew that Osman deserved any fate that could have overtaken him. Presently she was aware of Gordon's hand resting lightly on her shoulder and she looked up, ashamed of her weakness. The sun was just dipping below the western ridges. Musa came limping up the slope, blood-stained but radiant.

"The dogs are all dead, *effendi!"* he cried, industriously shaking a plundered watch, in an effort to make it run. "Such of our warriors as still live are faint from strife, and many sorely wounded. There is none to command now but thou."

"Sometimes problems settle themselves," mused Gordon. "But at a ghastly price. If the Rualla hadn't made that rush, which was the death of Hassan and Mitkhal – oh, well, such things are in the hands of Allah, as the Arabs say. A hundred better men than I have died today, but by the decree of some blind Fate, I live."

Gordon looked down on the wounded men. He turned to Musa.

"We must load the wounded on camels," he said, "and take them to the camp at the Walls where there's water and shade. Come."

As they started down the slope, he said to Olga:

"I'll have to stay with them till they're settled at the Walls, then I must start for the coast. Some of the Rualla will be able to ride,

though, and you need have no fear of them. They'll escort you to the nearest Turkish outpost."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Then I'm not your prisoner?"

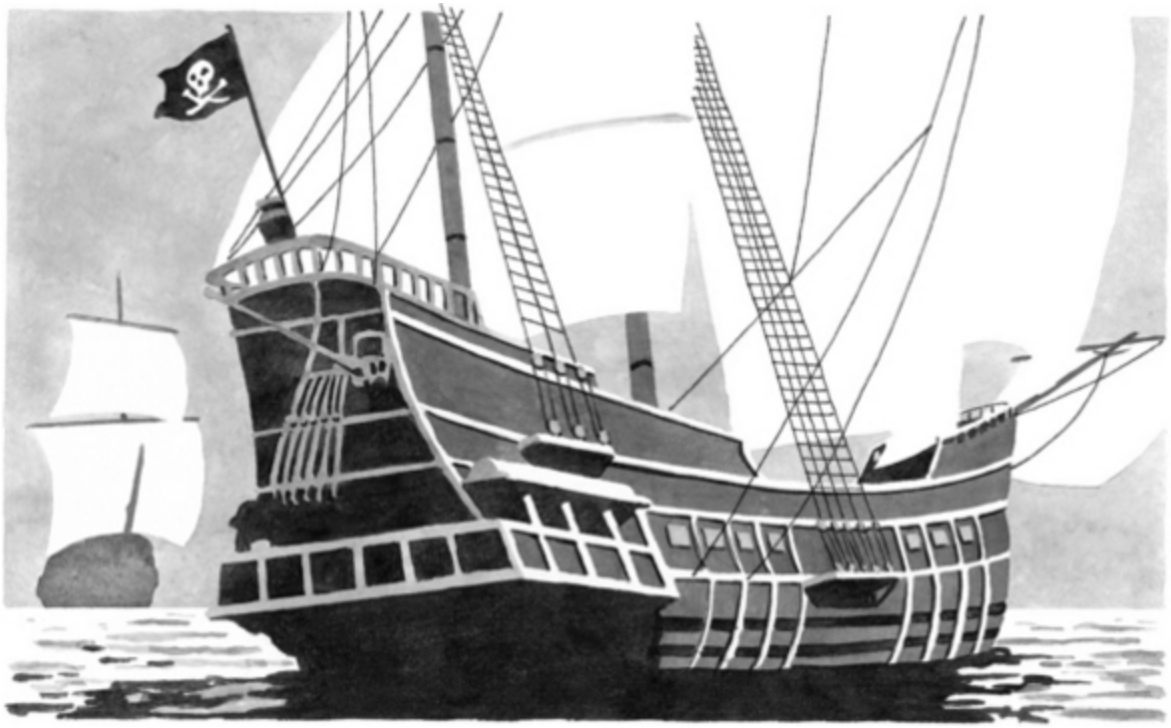
He laughed.

"I think you can help Feisal more by carrying out your original instructions of supplying misleading information to the Turks! I don't blame you for not confiding even in me. You have my deepest admiration, for you're playing the most dangerous game a woman can."

"Oh!" She felt a sudden warm flood of relief and gladness that he should know she was not really an enemy. Musa was well out of earshot. "I might have known you were high enough in Feisal's councils to know that I really am –"

"Gloria Willoughby, the cleverest, most daring secret agent the British government employs," he murmured. The girl impulsively placed her slender fingers in his, and hand in hand they went down the slope together.

OceanofPDF.com



Black Vulmea's Vengeance

I

Out of the *Cockatoo's* cabin staggered Black Terence Vulmea, pipe in one hand and flagon in the other. He stood with booted legs wide, teetering slightly to the gentle lift of the lofty poop. He was bareheaded and his shirt was open, revealing his broad hairy chest. He emptied the flagon and tossed it over the side with a gusty sigh of satisfaction, then directed his somewhat blurred gaze on the deck below. From poop ladder to forecastle it was littered by sprawling figures. The ship smelt like a brewery. Empty barrels, with their heads stove in, stood or rolled between the prostrate forms. Vulmea was the only man on his feet. From galley-boy to first mate the rest of the ship's company lay senseless after a debauch that had lasted a whole night long. There was not even a man at the helm.

But it was lashed securely and in that placid sea no hand was needed on the wheel. The breeze was light but steady. Land was a thin blue line to the east. A stainless blue sky held a sun whose heat had not yet become fierce.

Vulmea blinked indulgently down upon the sprawled figures of his crew, and glanced idly over the larboard side. He grunted incredulously and batted his eyes. A ship loomed where he had expected to see only naked ocean stretching to the skyline. She was little more than a hundred yards away, and was bearing down swiftly on the *Cockatoo*, obviously with the intention of laying her alongside. She was tall and square-rigged, her white canvas flashing dazzlingly in the sun. From the maintruck the flag of England whipped red against the blue. Her bulwarks were lined with tense figures, bristling with boarding-pikes and grappling irons, and through her open ports the astounded pirate glimpsed the glow of the burning matches the gunners held ready.

"All hands to battle-quarters!" yelled Vulmea confusedly. Reverberant snores answered the summons. All hands remained as they were.

“Wake up, you lousy dogs!” roared their captain. “Up, curse you! A king’s ship is at our throats!”

His only response came in the form of staccato commands from the frigate’s deck, barking across the narrowing strip of blue water.

“Damnation!”

Cursing luridly he lurched in a reeling run across the poop to the swivel-gun which stood at the head of the larboard ladder. Seizing this he swung it about until its muzzle bore full on the bulwark of the approaching frigate. Objects wavered dizzily before his bloodshot eyes, but he squinted along its barrel as if he were aiming a musket.

“Strike your colors, you damned pirate!” came a hail from the trim figure that trod the warship’s poop, sword in hand.

“Go to hell!” roared Vulmea, and knocked the glowing coals of his pipe into the vent of the gun-breech. The falcon crashed, smoke puffed out in a white cloud, and the double handful of musket balls with which the gun had been charged mowed a ghastly lane through the boarding party clustered along the frigate’s bulwark. Like a clap of thunder came the answering broadside and a storm of metal raked the *Cockatoo’s* decks, turning them into a red shambles.

Sails ripped, ropes parted, timbers splintered, and blood and brains mingled with the pools of liquor spilt on the decks. A round shot as big as a man’s head smashed into the falcon, ripping it loose from the swivel and dashing it against the man who had fired it. The impact knocked him backward headlong across the poop where his head hit the rail with a crack that was too much even for an Irish skull. Black Vulmea sagged senseless to the boards. He was as deaf to the triumphant shouts and the stamp of victorious feet on his red-streaming decks as were his men who had gone from the sleep of drunkenness to the black sleep of death without knowing what had hit them.

Captain John Wentyard, of his Majesty’s frigate the *Redoubtable*, sipped his wine delicately and set down the glass with a gesture that in another man would have smacked of affectation. Wentyard was a

tall man, with a narrow, pale face, colorless eyes, and a prominent nose. His costume was almost sober in comparison with the glitter of his officers who sat in respectful silence about the mahogany table in the main cabin.

"Bring in the prisoner," he ordered, and there was a glint of satisfaction in his cold eyes.

They brought in Black Vulmea, between four brawny sailors, his hands manacled before him and a chain on his ankles that was just long enough to allow him to walk without tripping. Blood was clotted in the pirate's thick black hair. His shirt was in tatters, revealing a torso bronzed by the sun and rippling with great muscles. Through the stern windows, he could see the topmasts of the *Cockatoo*, just sinking out of sight. That close-range broadside had robbed the frigate of a prize. His conquerors were before him and there was no mercy in their stares, but Vulmea did not seem at all abashed or intimidated. He met the stern eyes of the officers with a level gaze that reflected only a sardonic amusement. Wentyard frowned. He preferred that his captives cringe before him. It made him feel more like Justice personified, looking unemotionally down from a great height on the sufferings of the evil.

"You are Black Vulmea, the notorious pirate?"

"I'm Vulmea," was the laconic answer.

"I suppose you will say, as do all these rogues," sneered Wentyard, "that you hold a commission from the Governor of Tortuga? These privateer commissions from the French mean nothing to his Majesty. You –"

"Save your breath, fish-eyes!" Vulmea grinned hardly. "I hold no commission from anybody. I'm not one of your accursed swashbucklers who hide behind the name of buccaneer. I'm a pirate, and I've plundered English ships as well as Spanish – and be damned to you, heron-beak!"

The officers gasped at this effrontery, and Wentyard smiled a ghastly, mirthless smile, white with the anger he held in rein.

"You know that I have the authority to hang you out of hand?" he reminded the other.

“I know,” answered the pirate softly. “It won’t be the first time you’ve hanged me, John Wentyard.”

“What?” The Englishman stared.

A flame grew in Vulmea’s blue eyes and his voice changed subtly in tone and inflection; the brogue thickened almost imperceptibly.

“On the Galway coast it was, years ago, captain. You were a young officer then, scarce more than a boy – but with all your present characteristics already fully developed. There were some wholesale evictions, with the military to see the job was done, and the Irish were mad enough to make a fight of it – poor, ragged, half-starved peasants, fighting with sticks against full-armed English soldiers and sailors. After the massacre there were the usual hangings, and there was a boy crept into a thicket to watch – a lad of ten, who didn’t even know what it was all about. You spied him, John Wentyard, and had your dogs drag him forth and string him up alongside the kicking bodies of the others. ‘He’s Irish,’ you said as they heaved him aloft. ‘Little snakes grow into big ones.’ I was that boy. I’ve looked forward to this meeting, you English dog!”

Vulmea still smiled, but the veins knotted in his temples and the great muscles stood out distinctly on his manacled arms. Ironed and guarded though the pirate was, Wentyard involuntarily drew back, daunted by the stark and naked hate that blazed from those savage eyes.

“How did you escape your just deserts?” he asked coldly, recovering his poise.

Vulmea laughed shortly.

“Some of the peasants escaped the massacre and were hiding in the thickets. As soon as you left they came out, and not being civilized, cultured Englishmen, but only poor, savage Irishry, they cut me down along with the others, and found there was still a bit of life in me. We Gaels are hard to kill, as you Britons have learned to your cost.”

“You fell into our hands easily enough this time,” observed Wentyard.

Vulmea grinned. His eyes were grimly amused now, but the glint of murderous hate still lurked in their deeps.

“Who’d have thought to meet a king’s ship in these western seas? It’s been weeks since we sighted a sail of any kind, save for the carrack we took yesterday, with a cargo of wine bound for Panama from Valparaiso. It’s not the time of year for rich prizes. When the lads wanted a drinking bout, who was I to deny them? We drew out of the lanes the Spaniards mostly follow, and thought we had the ocean to ourselves. I’d been sleeping in my cabin for some hours before I came on deck to smoke a pipe or so, and saw you about to board us without firing a shot.”

“You killed seven of my men,” harshly accused Wentyard.

“And you killed all of mine,” retorted Vulmea. “Poor devils, they’ll wake up in hell without knowing how they got there.”

He grinned again, fiercely. His toes dug hard against the floor, unnoticed by the men who gripped him on either side. The blood was rioting through his veins, and the berserk feel of his great strength was upon him. He knew he could, in a sudden, volcanic explosion of power, tear free from the men who held him, clear the space between him and his enemy with one bound, despite his chains, and crush Wentyard’s skull with a smashing swing of his manacled fists. That he himself would die an instant later mattered not at all. In that moment he felt neither fears nor regrets – only a reckless, ferocious exultation and a cruel contempt for these stupid Englishmen about him. He laughed in their faces, joying in the knowledge that they did not know why he laughed. So they thought to chain the tiger, did they? Little they guessed of the devastating fury that lurked in his catlike thews.

He began filling his great chest, drawing in his breath slowly, imperceptibly, as his calves knotted and the muscles of his arms grew hard. Then Wentyard spoke again.

“I will not be overstepping my authority if I hang you within the hour. In any event you hang, either from my yard-arm or from a gibbet on the Port Royal wharves. But life is sweet, even to rogues like you, who notoriously cling to every moment granted them by outraged society. It would gain you a few more months of life if I

were to take you back to Jamaica to be sentenced by the governor. This I might be persuaded to do, on one condition."

"What's that?" Vulmea's tensed muscles did not relax; imperceptibly he began to settle into a semi-crouch.

"That you tell me the whereabouts of the pirate, Van Raven."

In that instant, while his knotted muscles went pliant again, Vulmea unerringly gauged and appraised the man who faced him, and changed his plan. He straightened and smiled.

"And why the Dutchman, Wentyard?" he asked softly. "Why not Tranicos, or Villiers, or McVeigh, or a dozen others more destructive to English trade than Van Raven? Is it because of the treasure he took from the Spanish plate-fleet? Aye, the king would like well to set his hands on that hoard, and there's a rich prize would go to the captain lucky or bold enough to find Van Raven and plunder him. Is that why you came all the way around the Horn, John Wentyard?"

"We are at peace with Spain," answered Wentyard acidly. "As for the purposes of an officer in his Majesty's navy, they are not for you to question."

Vulmea laughed at him, the blue flame in his eyes.

"Once I sank a king's cruiser off Hispaniola," he said. "Damn you and your prating of 'His Majesty'! Your English king is no more to me than so much rotten driftwood. Van Raven? He's a bird of passage. Who knows where he sails? But if it's treasure you want, I can show you a hoard that would make the Dutchman's loot look like a peat-pool beside the Caribbean Sea!"

A pale spark seemed to snap from Wentyard's colorless eyes, and his officers leaned forward tensely. Vulmea grinned hardly. He knew the credulity of navy men, which they shared with landsmen and honest mariners, in regard to pirates and plunder. Every seaman not himself a rover believed that every buccaneer had knowledge of vast hidden wealth. The loot the men of the Red Brotherhood took from the Spaniards, rich enough as it was, was magnified a thousand times in the telling, and rumor made every swaggering sea-rat the guardian of a treasure-trove.

Coolly plumbing the avarice of Wentyard's hard soul, Vulmea said: "Ten days' sail from here there's a nameless bay on the coast of

Ecuador. Four years ago Dick Harston, the English pirate, and I anchored there, in a quest of a hoard of ancient jewels called the Fangs of Satan. An Indian swore he had found them, hidden in a ruined temple in an uninhabited jungle a day's march inland, but superstitious fear of the old gods kept him from helping himself. But he was willing to guide us there.

"We marched inland with both crews, for neither of us trusted the other. To make a long tale short, we found the ruins of an old city, and beneath an ancient, broken altar, we found the jewels – rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, bloodstones, big as hen eggs, making a quivering flame of fire about the crumbling old shrine!"

The flame grew in Wentyard's eyes. His white fingers knotted about the slender stem of his wine glass.

"The sight of them was enough to madden a man," Vulmea continued, watching the captain narrowly. "We camped there for the night, and, one way or another, we fell out over the division of the spoil, though there was enough to make every man of us rich for life. We came to blows, though, and whilst we fought among ourselves, there came a scout running with word that a Spanish fleet had come into the bay, driven our ships away, and sent five hundred men ashore to pursue us. By Satan, they were on us before the scout ceased the telling! One of my men snatched the plunder away and hid it in the old temple, and we scattered, each band for itself. There was no time to take the plunder. We barely got away with our naked lives. Eventually I, with most of my crew, made my way back to the coast and was picked up by my ship which came slinking back after escaping from the Spaniards.

"Harston gained his ship with a handful of men, after skirmishing all the way with the Spaniards who chased him instead of us, and later was slain by savages on the coast of California.

"The Dons harried me all the way around the Horn, and I never had an opportunity to go back after the loot – until this voyage. It was there I was going when you overhauled me. The treasure's still there. Promise me my life and I'll take you to it."

"That is impossible," snapped Wentyard. "The best I can promise you is trial before the governor of Jamaica."

“Well,” said Vulmea, “maybe the governor might be more lenient than you. And much may happen between here and Jamaica.”

Wentyard did not reply, but spread a map on the broad table.

“Where is this bay?”

Vulmea indicated a certain spot on the coast. The sailors released their grip on his arms while he marked it, and Wentyard’s head was within reach, but the Irishman’s plans were changed, and they included a chance for life – desperate, but nevertheless a chance.

“Very well. Take him below.”

Vulmea went out with his guards, and Wentyard sneered coldly.

“A gentleman of his Majesty’s navy is not bound by a promise to such a rogue as he. Once the treasure is aboard the *Redoubtable*, gentlemen, I promise you he shall swing from a yard-arm.”

Ten days later the anchors rattled down in the nameless bay Vulmea had described.

II

It seemed desolate enough to have been the coast of an uninhabited continent. The bay was merely a shallow indentation of the shore-line. Dense jungle crowded the narrow strip of white sand that was the beach. Gay-plumed birds flitted among the broad fronds, and the silence of primordial savagery brooded over all. But a dim trail led back into the twilight vistas of green-walled mystery.

Dawn was a white mist on the water when seventeen men marched down the dim path. One was John Wentyard. On an expedition designed to find treasure, he would trust the command to none but himself. Fifteen were soldiers, armed with hangers and muskets. The seventeenth was Black Vulmea. The Irishman’s legs, perforce, were free, and the irons had been removed from his arms. But his wrists were bound before him with cords, and one end of the cord was in the grip of a brawny marine whose other hand held a cutlass ready to chop down the pirate if he made any move to escape.

“Fifteen men are enough,” Vulmea had told Wentyard. “Too many! Men go mad easily in the tropics, and the sight of the Fangs

of Satan is enough to madden any man, king's man or not. The more that see the jewels, the greater chance of mutiny before you raise the Horn again. You don't need more than three or four. Who are you afraid of? You said England was at peace with Spain, and there are no Spaniards anywhere near this spot, in any event."

"I wasn't thinking of Spaniards," answered Wentyard coldly. "I am providing against any attempt you might make to escape."

"Well," laughed Vulmea, "do you think you need fifteen men for that?"

"I'm taking no chances," was the grim retort. "You are stronger than two or three ordinary men, Vulmea, and full of wiles. My men will march with pieces ready, and if you try to bolt, they will shoot you down like the dog you are – should you, by any chance, avoid being cut down by your guard. Besides, there is always the chance of savages."

The pirate jeered.

"Go beyond the Cordilleras if you seek real savages. There are Indians there who cut off your head and shrink it no bigger than your fist. But they never come on this side of the mountains. As for the race that built the temple, they've all been dead for centuries. Bring your armed escort if you want to. It will be of no use. One strong man can carry away the whole hoard."

"One strong man!" murmured Wentyard, licking his lips as his mind reeled at the thought of the wealth represented by a load of jewels that required the full strength of a strong man to carry. Confused visions of knighthood and admiralty whirled through his head. "What about the path?" he asked suspiciously. "If this coast is uninhabited, how comes it there?"

"It was an old road, centuries ago, probably used by the race that built the city. In some places you can see where it was paved. But Harston and I were the first to use it for centuries. And you can tell it hasn't been used since. You can see where the young growth has sprung up above the scars of the axes we used to clear a way."

Wentyard was forced to agree. So now, before sunrise, the landing party was swinging inland at a steady gait that ate up the miles. The bay and the ship were quickly lost to sight. All morning they

tramped along through steaming heat, between green, tangled jungle walls where gay-hued birds flitted silently and monkeys chattered. Thick vines hung low across the trail, impeding their progress, and they were sorely annoyed by gnats and other insects. At noon they paused only long enough to drink some water and eat the ready-cooked food they had brought along. The men were stolid veterans, inured to long marches, and Wentyard would allow them no more rest than was necessary for their brief meal. He was afire with savage eagerness to view the hoard Vulmea had described.

The trail did not twist as much as most jungle paths. It was overgrown with vegetation, but it gave evidence that it had once been a road, well-built and broad. Pieces of paving were still visible here and there. By mid-afternoon the land began to rise slightly to be broken by low, jungle-choked hills. They were aware of this only by the rising and dipping of the trail. The dense walls on either hand shut off their view.

Neither Wentyard nor any of his men glimpsed the furtive, shadowy shapes which now glided along through the jungle on either hand. Vulmea was aware of their presence, but he only smiled grimly and said nothing. Carefully and so subtly that his guard did not suspect it, the pirate worked at the cords on his wrists, weakening and straining the strands by continual tugging and twisting. He had been doing this all day, and he could feel them slowly giving way.

The sun hung low in the jungle branches when the pirate halted and pointed to where the old road bent almost at right angles and disappeared into the mouth of a ravine.

“Down that ravine lies the old temple where the jewels are hidden.”

“On, then!” snapped Wentyard, fanning himself with his plumed hat. Sweat trickled down his face, wilting the collar of his crimson, gilt-embroidered coat. A frenzy of impatience was on him, his eyes dazzled by the imagined glitter of the gems Vulmea had so vividly described. Avarice makes for credulity, and it never occurred to

Wentyard to doubt Vulmea's tale. He saw in the Irishman only a hulking brute eager to buy a few months more of life. Gentlemen of his Majesty's navy were not accustomed to analyzing the characters of pirates. Wentyard's code was painfully simple: a heavy hand and a roughshod directness. He had never bothered to study or try to understand outlaw types.

They entered the mouth of the ravine and marched on between cliffs fringed with overhanging fronds. Wentyard fanned himself with his hat and gnawed his lip with impatience as he stared eagerly about for some sign of the ruins described by his captive. His face was paler than ever, despite the heat which reddened the bluff faces of his men, tramping ponderously after him. Vulmea's brown face showed no undue moisture. He did not tramp; he moved with the sure, supple tread of a panther, and without a suggestion of a seaman's lurching roll. His eyes ranged the walls above them and when a frond swayed without a breath of wind to move it, he did not miss it.

The ravine was some fifty feet wide, the floor carpeted by a low, thick growth of vegetation. The jungle ran densely along the rims of the walls, which were some forty feet high. They were sheer for the most part, but here and there natural ramps ran down into the gulch, half-covered with tangled vines. A few hundred yards ahead of them they saw that the ravine bent out of sight around a rocky shoulder. From the opposite wall there jutted a corresponding crag. The outlines of these boulders were blurred by moss and creepers, but they seemed too symmetrical to be the work of nature alone.

Vulmea stopped, near one of the natural ramps that sloped down from the rim. His captors looked at him questioningly.

"Why are you stopping?" demanded Wentyard fretfully. His foot struck something in the rank grass and he kicked it aside. It rolled free and grinned up at him – a rotting human skull. He saw glints of white in the green all about him – skulls and bones almost covered by the dense vegetation.

"Is this where you piratical dogs slew each other?" he demanded crossly. "What are you waiting on? What are you listening for?"

Vulmea relaxed his tense attitude and smiled indulgently.

“That used to be a gateway there ahead of us,” he said. “Those rocks on each side are really gate-pillars. This ravine was a roadway, leading to the city when people lived there. It’s the only approach to it, for it’s surrounded by sheer cliffs on all sides.” He laughed harshly. “This is like the road to Hell, John Wentyard: easy to go down – not so easy to go up again.”

“What are you maundering about?” snarled Wentyard, clapping his hat viciously on his head. “You Irish are all babblers and mooncalves! Get on with –”

From the jungle beyond the mouth of the ravine came a sharp twang. Something whined venomously down the gulch, ending its flight with a vicious thud. One of the soldiers gulped and started convulsively. His musket clattered to the earth and he reeled, clawing at his throat from which protruded a long shaft, vibrating like a serpent's head. Suddenly he pitched to the ground and lay twitching.

"Indians!" yelped Wentyard, and turned furiously on his prisoner. "Dog! Look at that! You said there were no savages hereabouts!"

Vulmea laughed scornfully.

"Do you call them savages? Bah! Poor-spirited dogs that skulk in the jungle, too fearful to show themselves on the coast. Don't you see them slinking among the trees? Best give them a volley before they grow too bold."

Wentyard snarled at him, but the Englishman knew the value of a display of firearms when dealing with natives, and he had a glimpse of brown figures moving among the green foliage. He barked an order and fourteen muskets crashed, and the bullets rattled among the leaves. A few severed fronds drifted down; that was all. But even as the smoke puffed out in a cloud, Vulmea snapped the frayed cords on his wrists, knocked his guard staggering with a buffet under the ear, snatched his cutlass and was gone, running like a cat up the steep wall of the ravine. The soldiers with their empty muskets gaped helplessly after him, and Wentyard's pistol banged futilely, an instant too late. From the green fringe above them came a mocking laugh.

"Fools! You stand in the door of Hell!"

"Dog!" yelled Wentyard, beside himself, but with his greed still uppermost in his befuddled mind. "We'll find the treasure without your help!"

"You can't find something that doesn't exist," retorted the unseen pirate. "There never were any jewels. It was a lie to draw you into a trap. Dick Harston never came here. I came here, and the Indians butchered all my crew in that ravine, as those skulls in the grass there testify."

“Liar!” was all Wentyard could find tongue for. “Lying dog! You told me there were no Indians hereabouts!”

“I told you the head-hunters never came over the mountains,” retorted Vulmea. “They don’t, either. I told you the people who built the city were all dead. That’s so, too. I didn’t tell you that a tribe of brown devils live in the jungle near here. They never go down to the coast, and they don’t like to have white men come into the jungle. I think they were the people who wiped out the race that built the city, long ago. Anyway, they wiped out my men, and the only reason I got away was because I’d lived with the red men of North America and learned their woodscraft. You’re in a trap you won’t get out of, Wentyard!”

“Climb that wall and take him!” ordered Wentyard, and half a dozen men slung their muskets on their backs and began clumsily to essay the rugged ramp up which the pirate had run with such catlike ease.

“Better trim sail and stand by to repel boarders,” Vulmea advised him from above. “There are hundreds of red devils out there – and no tame dogs to run at the crack of a caliver, either.”

“And you’d betray white men to savages!” raged Wentyard.

“It goes against my principles,” the Irishman admitted, “but it was my only chance for life. I’m sorry for your men. That’s why I advised you to bring only a handful. I wanted to spare as many as possible. There are enough Indians out there in the jungle to eat your whole ship’s company. As for you, you filthy dog, what you did in Ireland forfeited any consideration you might expect as a white man. I gambled on my neck and took my chances with all of you. It might have been me that arrow hit.”

———

The voice ceased abruptly, and just as Wentyard was wondering if there were no Indians on the wall above them, the foliage was violently agitated, there sounded a wild yell, and down came a naked brown body, all asprawl, limbs revolving in the air. It crashed

on the floor of the ravine and lay motionless – the figure of a brawny warrior, naked but for a loin-cloth of bark. The dead man was deep-chested, broad-shouldered and muscular, with features not unintelligent, but hard and brutal. He had been slashed across the neck.

The bushes waved briefly, and then again, further along the rim, which agitation Wentyard believed marked the flight of the Irishman along the ravine wall, pursued by the companions of the dead warrior, who must have stolen up on Vulmea while the pirate was shouting his taunts.

The chase was made in deadly silence, but down in the ravine conditions were anything but silent. At the sight of the falling body a bloodcurdling ululation burst forth from the jungle outside the mouth of the ravine, and a storm of arrows came whistling down it. Another man fell, and three more were wounded, and Wentyard called down the men who were laboriously struggling up the vine-matted ramp. He fell back down the ravine, almost to the bend where the ancient gate posts jutted, and beyond that point he feared to go. He felt sure that the ravine beyond the Gateway was filled with lurking savages. They would not have hemmed him in on all sides and then left open an avenue of escape.

At the spot where he halted there was a cluster of broken rocks that looked as though they might once have formed the walls of a building of some sort. Among them Wentyard made his stand. He ordered his men to lie prone, their musket barrels resting on the rocks. One man he detailed to watch for savages creeping up the ravine from behind them, the others watched the green wall visible beyond the path that ran into the mouth of the ravine. Fear chilled Wentyard's heart. The sun was already lost behind the trees and the shadows were lengthening. In the brief dusk of the tropic twilight, how could a white man's eye pick out a swift, flitting brown body, or a musket ball find its mark? And when darkness fell – Wentyard shivered despite the heat.

Arrows kept singing down the ravine, but they fell short or splintered on the rocks. But now bowmen hidden on the walls drove

down their shafts, and from their vantage point the stones afforded little protection. The screams of men skewered to the ground rose harrowingly. Wentyard saw his command melting away under his eyes. The only thing that kept them from being instantly exterminated was the steady fire he had them keep up at the foliage on the cliffs. They seldom saw their foes; they only saw the fronds shake, had an occasional glimpse of a brown arm. But the heavy balls, ripping through the broad leaves, made the hidden archers wary, and the shafts came at intervals instead of in volleys. Once a piercing death yell announced that a blind ball had gone home, and the English raised a croaking cheer.

Perhaps it was this which brought the infuriated warriors out of the jungle. Perhaps, like the white men, they disliked fighting in the dark, and wanted to conclude the slaughter before night fell. Perhaps they were ashamed longer to lurk hidden from a handful of men.

At any rate, they came out of the jungle beyond the trail suddenly, and by the scores, not scrawny primitives, but brawny, hard-muscled warriors, confident of their strength and physically a match for even the sinewy Englishmen. They came in a wave of brown bodies that suddenly flooded the ravine, and others leaped down the walls, swinging from the lianas. They were hundreds against the handful of Englishmen left. These rose from the rocks without orders, meeting death with the bulldog stubbornness of their breed. They fired a volley full into the tide of snarling faces that surged upon them, and then drew hangers and clubbed empty muskets. There was no time to reload. Their blast tore lanes in the onsweeping human torrent, but it did not falter; it came on and engulfed the white men in a snarling, slashing, smiting whirlpool.

Hangers whirred and bit through flesh and bone, clubbed muskets rose and fell, spattering brains. But copper-headed axes flashed dully in the twilight, war-clubs made a red ruin of the skulls they kissed, and there were a score of red arms to drag down each struggling white man. The ravine was choked with a milling,

eddying mass, revolving about a fast-dwindling cluster of desperate, white-skinned figures.

Not until his last man fell did Wentyard break away, blood smeared on his arms, dripping from his sword. He was hemmed in by a surging ring of ferocious figures, but he had one loaded pistol left. He fired it full in a painted face surmounted by a feathered crest and saw it vanish in red ruin. He clubbed a shaven head with the empty barrel, and rushed through the gap made by the falling bodies. A wild figure leaped at him, swinging a war-club, but the sword was quicker. Wentyard tore the blade free as the savage fell. Dusk was ebbing swiftly into darkness, and the figures swirling about him were becoming indistinct, vague of outline. Twilight waned quickly in the ravine and darkness had settled there before it veiled the jungle outside. It was the darkness that saved Wentyard, confusing his attackers. As the sworded Indian fell he found himself free, though men were rushing on him from behind, with clubs lifted.

Blindly he fled down the ravine. It lay empty before him. Fear lent wings to his feet. He raced through the stone abutted Gateway. Beyond it he saw the ravine widen out; stone walls rose ahead of him, almost hidden by vines and creepers, pierced with blank windows and doorways. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of a thrust in the back. His heart was pounding so loudly, the blood hammering so agonizingly in his temples, that he could not tell whether or not bare feet were thudding close behind him.

His hat and coat were gone, his shirt torn and blood-stained, though somehow he had come through that desperate mêlée unwounded. Before him he saw a vine-tangled wall, and an empty doorway. He ran reelingly into the door and turned, falling to his knee from sheer exhaustion. He shook the sweat from his eyes, panting gaspingly as he fumbled to reload his pistols. The ravine was a dim alleyway before him, running to the rock-buttressed bend. Moment by moment he expected to see it thronged with fierce faces, with swarming figures. But it lay empty and fierce cries of the

victorious warriors drew no nearer. For some reason they had not followed him through the Gateway.

Terror that they were creeping on him from behind brought him to his feet, pistols cocked, staring this way and that.

He was in a room whose stone walls seemed ready to crumble. It was roofless, and grass grew between the broken stones of the floor. Through the gaping roof he could see the stars just blinking out, and the frond-fringed rim of the cliff. Through a door opposite the one by which he crouched he had a vague glimpse of other vegetation-choked, roofless chambers beyond.

Silence brooded over the ruins, and now silence had fallen beyond the bend of the ravine. He fixed his eyes on the blur that was the Gateway, and waited. It stood empty. Yet he knew that the Indians were aware of his flight. Why did they not rush in and cut his throat? Were they afraid of his pistols? They had shown no fear of his soldiers' muskets. Had they gone away, for some inexplicable reason? Were those shadowy chambers behind him filled with lurking warriors? If so, why in God's name were they waiting?

He rose and went to the opposite door, craned his neck warily through it, and after some hesitation, entered the adjoining chamber. It had no outlet into the open. All its doors led into other chambers, equally ruinous, with broken roofs, cracked floors and crumbling walls. Three or four he traversed, his tread, as he crushed down the vegetation growing among the broken stones, seeming intolerably loud in the stillness. Abandoning his explorations – for the labyrinth seemed endless – he returned to the room that opened toward the ravine. No sound came up the gulch, but it was so dark under the cliff that men could have entered the Gateway and been crouching near him, without his being able to see them.

———

At last he could endure the suspense no longer. Walking as quietly as he was able, he left the ruins and approached the Gateway, now a well of blackness. A few moments later he was hugging the left-hand

abutment and straining his eyes to see into the ravine beyond. It was too dark to see anything more than the stars blinking over the rims of the walls. He took a cautious step beyond the Gateway – it was the swift swish of feet through the vegetation on the floor that saved his life. He sensed rather than saw a black shape loom out of the darkness, and he fired blindly and point-blank. The flash lighted a ferocious face, falling backward, and beyond it the Englishman dimly glimpsed other figures, solid ranks of them, surging inexorably toward him.

With a choked cry he hurled himself back around the gate-pillar, stumbled and fell and lay dumb and quaking, clenching his teeth against the sharp agony he expected in the shape of a spear-thrust. None came. No figure came lunging after him. Incredulously he gathered himself to his feet, his pistols shaking in his hands. They were waiting, beyond that bend, but they would not come through the Gateway, not even to glut their blood-lust. This fact forced itself upon him, with its implication of inexplicable mystery.

Stumblingly he made his way back to the ruins and groped into the black doorway, overcoming an instinctive aversion against entering the roofless chamber. Starlight shone through the broken roof, lightening the gloom a little, but black shadows clustered along the walls and the inner door was an ebon well of mystery. Like most Englishmen of his generation John Wentyard more than half believed in ghosts, and he felt that if ever there was a place fit to be haunted by the phantoms of a lost and forgotten race, it was these sullen ruins.

He glanced fearfully through the broken roof at the dark fringe of overhanging fronds on the cliffs above, hanging motionless in the breathless air, and wondered if moonrise, illuminating his refuge, would bring arrows questing down through the roof. Except for the far lone cry of a night-bird, the jungle was silent. There was not so much as the rustle of a leaf. If there were men on the cliffs there was no sign to show it. He was aware of hunger and an increasing thirst; rage gnawed at him, and a fear that was already tinged with panic.

He crouched at the doorway, pistols in his hands, naked sword at his knee, and after a while the moon rose, touching the overhanging fronds with silver long before it untangled itself from the trees and rose high enough to pour its light over the cliffs. Its light invaded the ruins, but no arrows came from the cliff, nor was there any sound from beyond the Gateway. Wentyard thrust his head through the door and surveyed his retreat.

The ravine, after it passed between the ancient gate-pillars, opened into a broad bowl, walled by cliffs, and unbroken except for the mouth of the gulch. Wentyard saw the rim as a continuous, roughly circular line, now edged with the fire of moonlight. The ruins in which he had taken refuge almost filled this bowl, being built against the cliffs on one side. Decay and smothering vines had almost obliterated the original architectural plan. He saw the structure as a maze of roofless chambers, the outer doors opening upon the broad space left between it and the opposite wall of the cliff. This space was covered with low, dense vegetation, which also choked some of the chambers. Wentyard saw no way of escape. The cliffs were not like the walls of the ravine. They were of solid rock and sheer, even jutting outward a little at the rim. No vines trailed down them. They did not rise many yards above the broken roofs of the ruins, but they were as far out of his reach as if they had towered a thousand feet. He was caught like a rat in a trap. The only way out was up the ravine, where the blood-lusting warriors waited with grim patience. He remembered Vulmea's mocking warning: "–Like the road to Hell: easy to go down; not so easy to go up again!" Passionately he hoped that the Indians had caught the Irishman and slain him slowly and painfully. He could have watched Vulmea flayed alive with intense satisfaction.

Presently, despite hunger and thirst and fear, he fell asleep, to dream of ancient temples where drums muttered and strange figures in parrot-feather mantles moved through the smoke of sacrificial fires; and he dreamed at last of a silent, hideous shape which came

to the inner door of his roofless chamber and regarded him with cold, inhuman eyes.

It was from this dream that he awakened, bathed in cold sweat, to start up with an incoherent cry, clutching his pistols. Then, fully awake, he stood in the middle of the chamber, trying to gather his scattered wits. Memory of the dream was vague but terrifying. Had he actually seen a shadow sway in the doorway and vanish as he awoke, or had it been only part of his nightmare? The red, lopsided moon was poised on the western rim of the cliffs, and that side of the bowl was in thick shadow, but still an illusive light found its way into the ruins. Wentyard peered through the inner doorway, pistols cocked. Light floated rather than streamed down from above, and showed him an empty chamber beyond. The vegetation on the floor was crushed down, but he remembered having walked back and forth across it several times.

Cursing his nervous imagination he returned to the outer doorway. He told himself that he chose that place the better to guard against an attack from the ravine, but the real reason was that he could not bring himself to select a spot deeper in the gloomy interior of the ancient ruins.

He sat down cross-legged just inside the doorway, his back against the wall, his pistols beside him and his sword across his knees. His eyes burned and his lips felt baked with the thirst that tortured him. The sight of the heavy globules of dew that hung on the grass almost maddened him, but he did not seek to quench his thirst by that means, believing as he did that it was rank poison. He drew his belt closer, against his hunger, and told himself that he would not sleep. But he did sleep, in spite of everything.

III

It was a frightful scream close at hand that awakened Wentyard. He was on his feet before he was fully awake, glaring wildly about him. The moon had set and the interior of the chamber was dark as Egypt, in which the outer doorway was but a somewhat lighter blur.

But outside it there sounded a blood-chilling gurgling, the heaving and flopping of a heavy body. Then silence.

It was a human being that had screamed. Wentyard groped for his pistols, found his sword instead, and hurried forth, his taut nerves thrumming. The starlight in the bowl, dim as it was, was less Stygian than the absolute blackness of the ruins. But he did not see the figure stretched in the grass until he stumbled over it. That was all he saw, then – just that dim form stretched on the ground before the doorway. The foliage hanging over the cliff rustled a little in the faint breeze. Shadows hung thick under the wall and about the ruins. A score of men might have been lurking near him, unseen. But there was no sound.

After a while Wentyard knelt beside the figure, straining his eyes in the starlight. He grunted softly. The dead man was not an Indian, but a black man, a brawny ebon giant, clad, like the red men, in a bark loin clout, with a crest of parrot feathers on his kinky head. A murderous copper-headed axe lay near his hand, and a great gash showed in his muscular breast, a lesser wound under his shoulder blade. He had been stabbed so savagely that the blade had transfixed him and come out through his back.

Wentyard swore at the accumulated mystery of it. The presence of the black man was not inexplicable. Negro slaves, fleeing from Spanish masters, frequently took to the jungle and lived with the natives. This black evidently did not share in whatever superstition or caution kept the Indians outside the bowl; he had come in alone to butcher the victim they had at bay. But the mystery of his death remained. The blow that had impaled him had been driven with more than ordinary strength. There was a sinister suggestion about the episode, though the mysterious killer had saved Wentyard from being brained in his sleep – it was as if some inscrutable being, having claimed the Englishman for its own, refused to be robbed of its prey. Wentyard shivered, shaking off the thought.

Then he realized that he was armed only with his sword. He had rushed out of the ruins half asleep, leaving his pistols behind him, after a brief fumbling that failed to find them in the darkness. He turned and hurried back into the chamber and began to grope on

the floor, first irritably, then with growing horror. *The pistols were gone*.

At this realization panic overwhelmed Wentyard. He found himself out in the starlight again without knowing just how he had got there. He was sweating, trembling in every limb, biting his tongue to keep from screaming in hysterical terror.

Frantically he fought for control. It was not imagination, then, which peopled those ghastly ruins with furtive, sinister shapes that glided from room to shadowy room on noiseless feet, and spied upon him while he slept. *Something* besides himself had been in that room – something that had stolen his pistols either while he was fumbling over the dead Negro outside, or – grisly thought! – while he slept. He believed the latter had been the case. He had heard no sound in the ruins while he was outside. But why had it not taken his sword as well? Was it the Indians, after all, playing a horrible game with him? Was it their eyes he seemed to feel burning upon him from the shadows? But he did not believe it was the Indians. They would have no reason to kill their black ally.

Wentyard felt that he was near the end of his rope. He was nearly frantic with thirst and hunger, and he shrank from the contemplation of another day of heat in that waterless bowl. He went toward the ravine mouth, grasping his sword in desperation, telling himself that it was better to be speared quickly than haunted to an unknown doom by unseen phantoms, or perish of thirst. But the blind instinct to live drove him back from the rock-buttressed Gateway. He could not bring himself to exchange an uncertain fate for certain death. Faint noises beyond the bend told him that men, many men, were waiting there, and retreated, cursing weakly.

In a futile gust of passion he dragged the black man's body to the Gateway and thrust it through. At least he would not have it for a companion to poison the air when it rotted in the heat.

He sat down about half-way between the ruins and the ravine-mouth, hugging his sword and straining his eyes into the shadowy

starlight, and felt that he was being watched from the ruins; he sensed a Presence there, inscrutable, inhuman, waiting – waiting –

He was still sitting there when dawn flooded jungle and cliffs with grey light, and a brown warrior, appearing in the Gateway, bent his bow and sent an arrow at the figure hunkered in the open space. The shaft cut into the grass near Wentyard's foot, and the white man sprang up stiffly and ran into the doorway of the ruins. The warrior did not shoot again. As if frightened by his own temerity, he turned and hurried back through the Gateway and vanished from sight.

Wentyard spat dryly and swore. Daylight dispelled some of the phantom terrors of the night, and he was suffering so much from thirst that his fear was temporarily submerged. He was determined to explore the ruins by each crevice and cranny and bring to bay whatever was lurking among them. At least he would have daylight by which to face it.

To this end he turned toward the inner door, and then he stopped in his tracks, his heart in his throat. In the inner doorway stood a great gourd, newly cut and hollowed, and filled with water; beside it was a stack of fruit, and in another calabash there was meat, still smoking faintly. With a stride he reached the door and glared through. Only an empty chamber met his eyes.

Sight of water and scent of food drove from his mind all thoughts of anything except his physical needs. He seized the water-gourd and drank gulpingly, the precious liquid splashing on his breast. The water was fresh and sweet, and no wine had ever given him such delirious satisfaction. The meat he found was still warm. What it was he neither knew nor cared. He ate ravenously, grasping the joints in his fingers and tearing away the flesh with his teeth. It had evidently been roasted over an open fire, and without salt or seasoning, but it tasted like food of the gods to the ravenous man. He did not seek to explain the miracle, nor to wonder if the food were poisoned. The inscrutable haunter of the ruins which had saved his life that night, and which had stolen his pistols, apparently meant to preserve him for the time being, at least, and Wentyard accepted the gifts without question.

And having eaten he lay down and slept. He did not believe the Indians would invade the ruins; he did not care much if they did, and speared him in his sleep. He believed that the unknown being which haunted the rooms could slay him any time it wished. It had been close to him again and again and had not struck. It had showed no signs of hostility so far, except to steal his pistols. To go searching for it might drive it into hostility.

Wentyard, despite his slaked thirst and full belly, was at the point where he had a desperate indifference to consequences. His world seemed to have crumbled about him. He had led his men into a trap to see them butchered; he had seen his prisoner escape; he was caught like a caged rat himself; the wealth he had lusted after and dreamed about had been proved a lie. Worn out with vain ragings against his fate, he slept.

The sun was high when he awoke and sat up with a startled oath. Black Vulmea stood looking down at him.

"Damn!" Wentyard sprang up, snatching at his sword. His mind was a riot of maddening emotions, but physically he was a new man, and nerved to a rage that was tinged with near-insanity.

"You dog!" he raved. "So the Indians didn't catch you on the cliffs!"

"Those red dogs?" Vulmea laughed. '"They didn't follow me past the Gateway. They don't come on the cliffs overlooking these ruins. They've got a cordon of men strung through the jungle, surrounding this place, but I can get through any time I want to. I cooked your breakfast – and mine – right under their noses, and they never saw me."

"My breakfast!" Wentyard glared wildly. "You mean it was you brought water and food for me?"

"Who else?"

"But – but why?" Wentyard was floundering in a maze of bewilderment.

Vulmea laughed, but he laughed only with his lips. His eyes were burning. "Well, at first I thought it would satisfy me if I saw you get

an arrow through your guts. Then when you broke away and got in here, I said, 'Better still! They'll keep the swine there until he starves, and I'll lurk about and watch him die slowly.' I knew they wouldn't come in after you. When they ambushed me and my crew in the ravine, I cut my way through them and got in here, just as you did, and they didn't follow me in. But I got out of here the first night. I made sure you wouldn't get out the way I did that time, and then settled myself to watch you die. I could come or go as I pleased after nightfall, and you'd never see or hear me."

"But in that case, I don't see why –"

"You probably wouldn't understand!" snarled Vulmea. "But just watching you starve wasn't enough. I wanted to kill you myself – I wanted to see your blood gush, and watch your eyes glaze!" The Irishman's voice thickened with his passion, and his great hands clenched until the knuckles showed white. "And I didn't want to kill a man half-dead with want. So I went back up into the jungle on the cliffs and got water and fruit, and knocked a monkey off a limb with a stone, and roasted him. I brought you a good meal and set it there in the door while you were sitting outside the ruins. You couldn't see me from where you were sitting, and of course you didn't hear anything. You English are all dull-eared."

"And it was you who stole my pistols last night!" muttered Wentyard, staring at the butts jutting from Vulmea's Spanish girdle.

"Aye! I took them from the floor beside you while you slept. I learned stealth from the Indians of North America. I didn't want you to shoot me when I came to pay my debt. While I was getting them I heard somebody sneaking up outside, and saw a black man coming toward the doorway. I didn't want him to be robbing me of my revenge, so I stuck my cutlass through him. You awakened when he howled, and ran out, as you'll remember, but I stepped back around the corner and in at another door. I didn't want to meet you except in broad open daylight and you in fighting trim."

"Then it was you who spied on me from the inner door," muttered Wentyard. "You whose shadow I saw just before the moon sank behind the cliffs."

“Not I!” Vulmea’s denial was genuine. “I didn’t come down into the ruins until after moonset, when I came to steal your pistols. Then I went back up on the cliffs, and came again just before dawn to leave your food.”

“But enough of this talk!” he roared gustily, whipping out his cutlass. “I’m mad with thinking of the Galway coast and dead men kicking in a row, and a rope that strangled me! I’ve tricked you, trapped you, and now I’m going to kill you!”

Wentyard’s face was a ghastly mask of hate, livid, with bared teeth and glaring eyes.

“Dog!” with a screech he lunged, trying to catch Vulmea off-guard.

But the cutlass met and deflected the straight blade, and Wentyard bounded back just in time to avoid the decapitating sweep of the pirate’s steel. Vulmea laughed fiercely and came on like a storm, and Wentyard met him with a drowning man’s desperation.

Like most officers of the British navy, Wentyard was proficient in the use of the long straight sword he carried. He was almost as tall as Vulmea, and though he looked slender beside the powerful figure of the pirate, he believed that his skill would offset the sheer strength of the Irishman.

He was disillusioned within the first few moments of the fight. Vulmea was neither slow nor clumsy. He was as quick as a wounded panther, and his sword-play was no less crafty than Wentyard's. It only seemed so, because of the pirate's furious style of attack, showering blow on blow with what looked like sheer recklessness. But the very ferocity of his attack was his best defense, for it gave his opponent no time to launch a counter-attack.

The power of his blows, beating down on Wentyard's blade, rocked and shook the Englishman to his heels, numbing his wrist and arm with their impact. Blind fury, humiliation, naked fright combined to rob the captain of his poise and cunning. A stamp of feet, a louder clash of steel, and Wentyard's blade whirred into a corner. The Englishman reeled back, his face livid, his eyes like those of a madman.

"Pick up your sword!" Vulmea was panting, not so much from exertion as from rage. Wentyard did not seem to hear him.

"Bah!" Vulmea threw aside his cutlass in a spasm of disgust. "Can't you even fight? I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

He slapped Wentyard viciously first on one side of the face and then on the other. The Englishman screamed wordlessly and launched himself at the pirate's throat, and Vulmea checked him with a buffet in the face and knocked him sprawling with a savage smash under the heart. Wentyard got to his knees and shook the blood from his face, while Vulmea stood over him, his brows black and his great fists knotted.

"Get up!" muttered the Irishman thickly. "Get up, you hangman of peasants and children!"

Wentyard did not heed him. He was groping inside his shirt, from which he drew out something he stared at with painful intensity.

"Get up, damn you, before I set my boot-heels on your face –"

Vulmea broke off, glaring incredulously. Wentyard, crouching over the object he had drawn from his shirt, was weeping in great, racking sobs.

"What the hell!" Vulmea jerked it away from him, consumed by wonder to learn what could bring tears from John Wentyard. It was a skillfully painted miniature. The blow he had struck Wentyard had cracked it, but not enough to obliterate the soft gentle faces of a pretty young woman and child which smiled up at the scowling Irishman.

"Well, I'm damned!" Vulmea stared from the broken portrait in his hand to the man crouching miserably on the floor. "Your wife and daughter?"

Wentyard, his bloody face sunk in his hands, nodded mutely. He had endured much within the last night and day. The breaking of the portrait he always carried over his heart was the last straw; it seemed like an attack on the one soft spot in his hard soul, and it left him dazed and demoralized.

Vulmea scowled ferociously, but it somehow seemed forced.

"I didn't know you had a wife and child," he said almost defensively.

"The lass is but five years old," gulped Wentyard. "I haven't seen them in nearly a year. My God, what's to become of them now? A navy captain's pay is none so great. I've never been able to save anything. It was for them I sailed in search of Van Raven and his treasure. I hoped to get a prize that would take care of them if aught happened to me. Kill me!" he cried shrilly, his voice cracking at the highest pitch. "Kill me and be done with it, before I lose my manhood with thinking of them, and beg for my life like a craven dog!"

But Vulmea stood looking down at him with a frown. Varying expressions crossed his dark face, and suddenly he thrust the portrait back in the Englishman's hand.

"You're too poor a creature for me to soil my hands with!" he sneered, and turning on his heel, strode through the inner door.

Wentyard stared dully after him, then, still on his knees, began to caress the broken picture, whimpering softly like an animal in pain as if the breaks in the ivory were wounds in his own flesh. Men break suddenly and unexpectedly in the tropics, and Wentyard's collapse was appalling.

He did not look up when the swift stamp of boots announced Vulmea's sudden return, without the pirate's usual stealth. A savage clutch on his shoulder raised him to stare stupidly into the Irishman's convulsed face.

"You're an infernal dog!" snarled Vulmea, in a fury that differed strangely from his former murderous hate. He broke into lurid imprecations, cursing Wentyard with all the proficiency he had

acquired during his years at sea. “I ought to split your skull,” he wound up. “For years I’ve dreamed of it, especially when I was drunk. I’m a cursed fool not to stretch you dead on the floor. I don’t owe you any consideration, blast you! Your wife and daughter don’t mean anything to me. But I’m a fool, like all the Irish, a blasted, chicken-hearted, sentimental fool, and I can’t be the cause of a helpless woman and her colleen starving. Get up and quit sniveling!”

Wentyard looked up at him stupidly.

“You – you came back to help me?”

“I might as well stab you as leave you here to starve!” roared the pirate, sheathing his sword. “Get up and stick your skewer back in its scabbard. Who’d have ever thought that a scraun like you would have women-folk like those innocents? Hell’s fire! You ought to be shot! Pick up your sword. You may need it before we get away. But remember, I don’t trust you any further than I can throw a whale by the tail, and I’m keeping your pistols. If you try to stab me when I’m not looking I’ll break your head with my cutlass hilt.”

Wentyard, like a man in a daze, replaced the painting carefully in his bosom and mechanically picked up his sword and sheathed it. His numbed wits began to thaw out, and he tried to pull himself together.

“What are we to do now?” he asked.

“Shut up!” growled the pirate. “I’m going to save you for the sake of the lady and the lass, but I don’t have to talk to you!” With rare consistency he then continued: “We’ll leave this trap the same way I came and went.

“Listen: four years ago I came here with a hundred men. I’d heard rumors of a ruined city up here, and I thought there might be loot hidden in it. I followed the old road from the beach, and those brown dogs let me and my men get in the ravine before they started butchering us. There must have been five or six hundred of them. They raked us from the walls, and then charged us – some came down the ravine and others jumped down the walls behind us and

cut us off. I was the only one who got away, and I managed to cut my way through them, and ran into this bowl. They didn't follow me in, but stayed outside the Gateway to see that I didn't get out.

"But I found another way – a slab had fallen away from the wall of a room that was built against the cliff, and a stairway was cut in the rock. I followed it and came out of a sort of trap door up on the cliffs. A slab of rock was over it, but I don't think the Indians knew anything about it anyway, because they never go up on the cliffs that overhang the basin. They never come in here from the ravine, either. There's something here they're afraid of – ghosts, most likely.

"The cliffs slope down into the jungle on the outer sides, and the slopes and the crest are covered with trees and thickets. They had a cordon of men strung around the foot of the slopes, but I got through at night easily enough, made my way to the coast and sailed away with the handful of men I'd left aboard my ship.

"When you captured me the other day, I was going to kill you with my manacles, but you started talking about treasure, and a thought sprang in my mind to steer you into a trap that I might possibly get out of. I remembered this place, and I mixed a lot of truth in with some lies. The Fangs of Satan are no myth; they are a hoard of jewels hidden somewhere on this coast, but this isn't the place. There's no plunder about here.

"The Indians have a ring of men strung around this place, as they did before. I can get through, but it isn't going to be so easy getting you through. You English are like buffaloes when you start through the brush. We'll start just after dark and try to get through before the moon rises.

"Come on; I'll show you the stair."

Wentyard followed him through a series of crumbling, vine-tangled chambers, until he halted before a doorway that gaped in the wall that was built against the cliff. A thick slab leaned against the wall which obviously served as a door. The Englishman saw a flight of narrow steps, carved in the solid rock, leading upward through a shaft tunneled in the cliff.

"I meant to block the upper mouth by heaping big rocks on the slab that covers it," said Vulmea. "That was when I was going to let

you starve. I knew you might find the stair. I doubt if the Indians know anything about it, as they never come in here or go up on the cliffs. But they know a man might be able to get out over the cliffs some way, so they've thrown that cordon around the slopes.

"That nigger I killed was a different proposition. A slave ship was wrecked off this coast a year ago, and the blacks escaped and took to the jungle. There's a regular mob of them living somewhere near here. This particular black man wasn't afraid to come into the ruins. If there are more of his kind out there with the Indians, they may try again tonight. But I believe he was the only one, or he wouldn't have come alone."

"Why don't we go up the cliff now and hide among the trees?" asked Wentyard.

"Because we might be seen by the men watching below the slopes, and they'd guess that we were going to make a break tonight, and redouble their vigilance. After awhile I'll go and get some more food. They won't see me."

The men returned to the chamber where Wentyard had slept. Vulmea grew taciturn, and Wentyard made no attempt at conversation. They sat in silence while the afternoon dragged by. An hour or so before sundown Vulmea rose with a curt word, went up the stair and emerged on the cliffs. Among the trees he brought down a monkey with a dextrously-thrown stone, skinned it, and brought it back into the ruins along with a calabash of water from a spring on the hillside. For all his woodscraft he was not aware that he was being watched; he did not see the fierce black face that glared at him from a thicket that stood where the cliffs began to slope down into the jungle below.

Later, when he and Wentyard were roasting the meat over a fire built in the ruins, he raised his head and listened intently.

"What do you hear?" asked Wentyard.

"A drum," grunted the Irishman.

"I hear it," said Wentyard after a moment. "Nothing unusual about that."

"It doesn't sound like an Indian drum," answered Vulmea. "Sounds more like an African drum."

Wentyard nodded agreement; his ship had lain off the mangrove swamps of the Slave Coast, and he had heard such drums rumbling to one another through the steaming night. There was a subtle difference in the rhythm and timbre that distinguished it from an Indian drum.

Evening came on and ripened slowly to dusk. The drum ceased to throb. Back in the low hills, beyond the ring of cliffs, a fire glinted under the dusky trees, casting brown and black faces into sharp relief.

An Indian whose ornaments and bearing marked him as a chief squatted on his hams, his immobile face turned toward the ebony giant who stood facing him. This man was nearly a head taller than any other man there, his proportions overshadowing both the Indians squatting about the fire and the black warriors who stood in a close group behind him. A jaguar-skin mantle was cast carelessly over his brawny shoulders, and copper bracelets ornamented his thickly-muscled arms. There was an ivory ring on his head, and parrot-feathers stood up from his kinky hair. A shield of hard wood and toughened bull-hide was on his left arm, and in his right hand he gripped a great spear whose hammered iron head was as broad as a man's hand.

"I came swiftly when I heard the drum," he said gutturally, in the bastard-Spanish that served as a common speech for the savages of both colors. "I knew it was N'Onga who called me. N'Onga had gone from my camp to fetch Ajumba, who was lingering with your tribe. N'Onga told me by the drum-talk that a white man was at bay, and Ajumba was dead. I came in haste. Now you tell me that you dare not enter the Old City."

"I have told you a devil dwells there," answered the Indian doggedly. "He has chosen the white man for his own. He will be angry if you try to take him away from him. It is death to enter his kingdom."

The black chief lifted his great spear and shook it defiantly.

"I was a slave to the Spaniards long enough to know that the only devil is a white man! I do not fear your devil. In my land his brothers are big as he, and I have slain one with a spear like this. A

day and a night have passed since the white man fled into the Old City. Why has not the devil devoured him, or this other who lingers on the cliffs?"

"The devil is not hungry," muttered the Indian. "He waits until he is hungry. He has eaten recently. When he is hungry again he will take them. I will not go into his lair with my men. You are a stranger in this country. You do not understand these things."

"I understand that Bigomba who was a king in his own country fears nothing, neither man nor demon," retorted the black giant. "You tell me that Ajumba went into the Old City by night, and died. I have seen his body. The devil did not slay him. One of the white men stabbed him. If Ajumba could go into the Old City and not be seized by the devil, then I and my thirty men can go. I know how the big white man comes and goes between the cliffs and the ruins. There is a hole in the rock with a slab for a door over it. N'Onga watched from the bushes high up on the slopes and saw him come forth and later return through it. I have placed men there to watch it. If the white men come again through that hole, my warriors will spear them. If they do not come, we will go in as soon as the moon rises. Your men hold the ravine, and they can not flee that way. We will hunt them like rats through the crumbling houses."

IV

"Easy now," muttered Vulmea. "It's as dark as Hell in this shaft."

Dusk had deepened into early darkness. The white men were groping their way up the steps cut in the rock. Looking back and down Wentyard made out the lower mouth of the shaft only as a slightly lighter blur in the blackness. They climbed on, feeling their way, and presently Vulmea halted with a muttered warning. Wentyard, groping, touched his thigh and felt the muscles tensing upon it. He knew that Vulmea had placed his shoulders under the slab that closed the upper entrance, and was heaving it up. He saw a crack appear suddenly in the blackness above him, limning the Irishman's bent head and foreshortened figure.

The stone came clear and starlight gleamed through the aperture, laced by the overhanging branches of the trees. Vulmea let the slab fall on the stone rim, and started to climb out of the shaft. He had emerged head, shoulders and hips when without warning a black form loomed against the stars and a gleam of steel hissed downward at his breast.

Vulmea threw up his cutlass and the spear rang against it, staggering him on the steps with the impact. Snatching a pistol from his belt with his left hand he fired point-blank and the black man groaned and fell, head and arms dangling in the opening. He struck the pirate as he fell, destroying Vulmea's already precarious balance. He toppled backward down the steps, carrying Wentyard with him. A dozen steps down they brought up in a sprawling heap, and staring upward, saw the square well above them fringed with indistinct black blobs they knew were heads outlined against the stars.

"I thought you said the Indians never –" panted Wentyard.

"They're not Indians," growled Vulmea, rising. "They're negroes. Cimarroons! The same dogs who escaped from the slave ship. That drum we heard was one of them calling the others. Look out!"

Spears came whirring down the shaft, splintering on the steps, glancing from the walls. The white men hurled themselves recklessly down the steps at the risk of broken limbs. They tumbled through the lower doorway and Vulmea slammed the heavy slab in place.

"They'll be coming down it next," he snarled. "We've got to heap enough rocks against it to hold it – no, wait a minute! If they've got the guts to come at all, they'll come by the ravine if they can't get in this way, or on ropes hung from the cliffs. This place is easy enough to get into – not so damned easy to get out of. We'll leave the shaft open. If they come this way we can get them in a bunch as they try to come out."

He pulled the slab aside, standing carefully away from the door.

"Suppose they come from the ravine and this way, too?"

"They probably will," growled Vulmea, "but maybe they'll come this way first, and maybe if they come down in a bunch we can kill

them all. There may not be more than a dozen of them. They'll never persuade the Indians to follow them in."

He set about reloading the pistol he had fired, with quick, sure hands in the dark. It consumed the last grain of powder in the flask. The white men lurked like phantoms of murder about the doorway of the stair, waiting to strike suddenly and deadlily. Time dragged. No sound came from above. Wentyard's imagination was at work again, picturing an invasion from the ravine, and dusky figures gliding about them, surrounding the chamber. He spoke of this and Vulmea shook his head.

"When they come I'll hear them; nothing on two legs can get in here without my knowing it."

Suddenly Wentyard was aware of a dim glow pervading the ruins. The moon was rising above the cliffs. Vulmea swore.

"No chance of our getting away tonight. Maybe those black dogs were waiting for the moon to come up. Go into the chamber where you slept and watch the ravine. If you see them sneaking in that way, let me know. I can take care of any that come down the stair."

Wentyard felt his flesh crawl as he made his way through those dim chambers. The moonlight glinted down through vines tangled across the broken roofs, and shadows lay thick across his path. He reached the chamber where he had slept, and where the coals of their fire still glowed dully. He started across toward the outer door when a soft sound brought him whirling around. A cry was wrenched from his throat.

Out of the darkness of a corner rose a swaying shape; a great wedge-shaped head and an arched neck were outlined against the moonlight. In one brain-staggering instant the mystery of the ruins became clear to him; he knew what had watched him with lidless eyes as he lay sleeping, and what had glided away from his door as he awoke – he knew why the Indians would not come into the ruins or mount the cliffs above them. He was face to face with the devil of the deserted city, hungry at last – and that devil was a giant anaconda!

In that moment John Wentyard experienced such fear and loathing horror as ordinarily come to men only in foul nightmares.

He could not run, and after that first scream his tongue seemed frozen to his palate. Only when the hideous head darted toward him did he break free from the paralysis that engulfed him and then it was too late.

He struck at it wildly and futilely, and in an instant it had him – lapped and wrapped about with coils which were like huge cables of cold, pliant steel. He shrieked again, fighting madly against the crushing constriction – he heard the rush of Vulmea's boots – then the pirate's pistols crashed together and he heard plainly the thud of the bullets into the great snake's body. It jerked convulsively and whipped from about him, hurling him sprawling to the floor, and then it came at Vulmea like the rush of a hurricane through the grass, its forked tongue licking in and out in the moonlight, and the noise of its hissing filling the chamber.

Vulmea avoided the battering-ram stroke of the blunt nose with a sidewise spring that would have shamed a starving jaguar, and his cutlass was a sheen in the moonlight as it hewed deep into the mighty neck. Blood spurted and the great reptile rolled and knotted, sweeping the floor and dislodging stones from the wall with its thrashing tail. Vulmea leaped high, clearing it as it lashed but Wentyard, just climbing to his feet, was struck and knocked sprawling into a corner. Vulmea was springing in again, cutlass lifted, when the monster rolled aside and fled through the inner door, with a loud rushing sound through the thick vegetation.

Vulmea was after it, his berserk fury fully roused. He did not wish the wounded reptile to crawl away and hide, perhaps to return later and take them by surprise. Through chamber after chamber the chase led, in a direction neither of the men had followed in his former explorations, and at last into a room almost choked by tangled vines. Tearing these aside Vulmea stared into a black aperture in the wall, just in time to see the monster vanishing into its depths. Wentyard, trembling in every limb, had followed, and now looked over the pirate's shoulder. A reptilian reek came from the aperture, which they now saw as an arched doorway, partly masked by thick vines. Enough moonlight found its way through the roof to reveal a glimpse of stone steps leading up into darkness.

“I missed this,” muttered Vulmea. “When I found the stair I didn’t look any further for an exit. Look how the door-sill glistens with scales that have been rubbed off that brute’s belly. He uses it often. I believe those steps lead to a tunnel that goes clear through the cliffs. There’s nothing in this bowl that even a snake could eat or drink. He has to go out into the jungle to get water and food. If he was in the habit of going out by the way of the ravine, there’d be a path worn away through the vegetation, like there is in this room. Besides, the Indians wouldn’t stay in the ravine. Unless there’s some other exit we haven’t found, I believe that he comes and goes this way, and that means it lets into the outer world. It’s worth trying, anyway.”

“You mean to follow that fiend into that black tunnel?” ejaculated Wentyard aghast.

“Why not? We’ve got to follow and kill him anyway. If we run into a nest of them – well, we’ve got to die some time, and if we wait here much longer the Cimarroons will be cutting our throats. This is a chance to get away, I believe. But we won’t go in the dark.”

Hurrying back to the room where they had cooked the monkey, Vulmea caught up a fagot, wrapped a torn strip of his shirt about one end and set it smouldering in the coals which he blew into a tiny flame. The improvised torch flickered and smoked, but it cast light of a sort. Vulmea strode back to the chamber where the snake had vanished, followed by Wentyard who stayed close within the dancing ring of light, and saw writhing serpents in every vine that swayed overhead.

The torch revealed blood thickly spattered on the stone steps. Squeezing their way between the tangled vines which did not admit a man’s body as easily as a serpent’s, they mounted the steps warily. Vulmea went first, holding the torch high and ahead of him, his cutlass in his right hand. He had thrown away the useless, empty pistols. They climbed half a dozen steps and came into a tunnel some fifteen feet wide and perhaps ten feet high from the stone floor to the vaulted roof. The serpent-reek and the glisten of the floor told of long occupancy by the brute, and the blood-drops ran on before them.

The walls, floor and roof of the tunnel were in a much better state of preservation than were the ruins outside, and Wentyard found time to marvel at the ingenuity of the ancient race which had built it.

Meanwhile, in the moonlit chamber they had just quitted, a giant black man appeared as silently as a shadow. His great spear glinted in the moonlight, and the plumes on his head rustled as he turned to look about him. Four warriors followed him.

“They went into that door,” said one of these, pointing to the vine-tangled entrance. “I saw their torch vanish into it. But I feared to follow them, alone as I was, and I ran to tell you, Bigomba.”

“But what of the screams and the shot we heard just before we descended the shaft?” asked another uneasily.

“I think they met the demon and slew it,” answered Bigomba. “Then they went into this door. Perhaps it is a tunnel which leads through the cliffs. One of you go gather the rest of the warriors who are scattered through the rooms searching for the white dogs. Bring them after me. Bring torches with you. As for me, I will follow with the other three, at once. Bigomba sees like a lion in the dark.”

As Vulmea and Wentyard advanced through the tunnel Wentyard watched the torch fearfully. It was not very satisfactory, but it gave some light, and he shuddered to think of its going out or burning to a stump and leaving them in darkness. He strained his eyes into the gloom ahead, momentarily expecting to see a vague, hideous figure rear up amidst it. But when Vulmea halted suddenly it was not because of an appearance of the reptile. They had reached a point where a smaller corridor branched off the main tunnel, leading away to the left.

“Which shall we take?”

Vulmea bent over the floor, lowering his torch. “The blood-drops go to the left,” he grunted. “That’s the way he went.”

“Wait!” Wentyard gripped his arm and pointed along the main tunnel. “Look! There ahead of us! Light!”

Vulmea thrust his torch behind him, for its flickering glare made the shadows seem blacker beyond its feeble radius. Ahead of them, then, he saw something like a floating gray mist, and knew it was moonlight finding its way somehow into the tunnel. Abandoning the hunt for the wounded reptile, the men rushed forward and emerged into a broad square chamber, hewn out of solid rock. But Wentyard swore in bitter disappointment. The moonlight was coming, not from a door opening into the jungle, but from a square shaft in the roof, high above their heads.

An archway opened in each wall, and the one opposite the arch by which they had entered was fitted with a heavy door, corroded and eaten by decay. Against the wall to their right stood a stone image, taller than a man, a carven grotesque, at once manlike and bestial. A stone altar stood before it, its surface channeled and darkly stained. Something on the idol’s breast caught the moonlight in a frosty sparkle.

“The devil!” Vulmea sprang forward and wrenched it away. He held it up – a thing like a giant’s necklace, made of jointed plates of hammered gold, each as broad as a man’s palm and set with curiously-cut jewels.

“I thought I lied when I told you there were gems here,” grunted the pirate. “It seems I spoke the truth unwittingly! These are not the Fangs of Satan, but they’ll fetch a tidy fortune anywhere in Europe.”

“What are you doing?” demanded Wentyard, as the Irishman laid the huge necklace on the altar and lifted his cutlass. Vulmea’s reply was a stroke that severed the ornament into equal halves. One half he thrust into Wentyard’s astounded hands.

“If we get out of here alive that will provide for the wife and child,” he grunted.

“But you –” stammered Wentyard. “You hate me – yet you save my life and then give me this –”

“Shut up!” snarled the pirate. “I’m not giving it to you; I’m giving it to the girl and her baby. Don’t you venture to thank me, curse you! I hate you as much as I–”

He stiffened suddenly, wheeling to glare down the tunnel up which they had come. He stamped out the torch and crouched down behind the altar, drawing Wentyard with him.

“Men!” he snarled. “Coming down the tunnel, I heard steel clink on stone. I hope they didn’t see the torch. Maybe they didn’t. It wasn’t much more than a coal in the moonlight.”

They strained their eyes down the tunnel. The moon hovered at an angle above the open shaft which allowed some of its light to stream a short way down the tunnel. Vision ceased at the spot where the smaller corridor branched off. Presently four shadows bulked out of the blackness beyond, taking shape gradually like figures emerging from a thick fog. They halted, and the white men saw the largest one – a giant who towered above the others – point silently with his spear, up the tunnel, then down the corridor. Two of the shadowy shapes detached themselves from the group and moved off down the corridor out of sight. The giant and the other man came on up the tunnel.

“The Cimarroons, hunting us,” muttered Vulmea. “They’re splitting their party to make sure they find us. Lie low; there may be a whole crew right behind them.”

They crouched lower behind the altar while the two blacks came up the tunnel, growing more distinct as they advanced. Wentyard’s skin crawled at the sight of the broad-bladed spears held ready in their hands. The biggest one moved with the supple tread of a great panther, head thrust forward, spear poised, shield lifted. He was a formidable image of rampant barbarism, and Wentyard wondered if even such a man as Vulmea could stand before him with naked steel and live.

They halted in the doorway, and the white men caught the white flash of their eyes as they glared suspiciously about the chamber. The smaller black seized the giant's arm convulsively and pointed, and Wentyard's heart jumped into his throat. He thought they had been discovered, but the negro was pointing at the idol. The big man grunted contemptuously. However slavishly in awe he might be of the fetishes of his native coast, the gods and demons of other races held no terrors for him.

But he moved forward majestically to investigate, and Wentyard realized that discovery was inevitable.

Vulmea whispered fiercely in his ear: "We've got to get them, quick! Take the brave. I'll take the chief. Now!"

They sprang up together, and the blacks cried out involuntarily, recoiling from the unexpected apparitions. In that instant the white men were upon them.

The shock of their sudden appearance had stunned the smaller black. He was small only in comparison with his gigantic companion. He was as tall as Wentyard and the great muscles knotted under his sleek skin. But he was staggering back, gaping stupidly, spear and shield lowered on limply hanging arms. Only the bite of steel brought him to his senses, and then it was too late. He screamed and lunged madly, but Wentyard's sword had girded deep into his vitals and his lunge was wild. The Englishman side-stepped and thrust again and yet again, under and over the shield, fleshing his blade in groin and throat. The black man swayed in his rush, his arms fell, shield and spear clattered to the floor and he toppled down upon them.

Wentyard turned to stare at the battle waging behind him, where the two giants fought under the square beam of moonlight, black and white, spear and shield against cutlass.

Bigomba, quicker-witted than his follower, had not gone down under the unexpected rush of the white man. He had reacted instantly to his fighting instinct. Instead of retreating he had thrown up his shield to catch the down-swinging cutlass, and had countered with a ferocious lunge that scraped blood from the Irishman's neck as he ducked aside.

Now they fought in grim silence, while Wentyard circled about them, unable to get in a thrust that might not imperil Vulmea. Both moved with the sure-footed quickness of tigers. The black man towered above the white, but even his magnificent proportions could not overshadow the sinewy physique of the pirate. In the moonlight the great muscles of both men knotted, rippled and coiled in response to their herculean exertions. The play was bewildering, almost blinding the eye that tried to follow it.

Again and again the pirate barely avoided the dart of the great spear, and again and again Bigomba caught on his shield a stroke that otherwise would have shorn him asunder. Speed of foot and strength of wrist alone saved Vulmea, for he had no defensive armor. But repeatedly he either dodged or side-stepped the savage thrusts, or beat aside the spear with his blade. And he rained blow on blow with his cutlass, slashing the bull-hide to ribbons, until the shield was little more than a wooden framework through which, slipping in a lightning-like thrust, the cutlass drew first blood as it raked through the flesh across the black chief's ribs.

At that Bigomba roared like a wounded lion, and like a wounded lion he leaped. Hurling the shield at Vulmea's head he threw all his giant body behind the arm that drove the spear at the Irishman's breast. The muscles leaped up in quivering bunches on his arm as he smote, and Wentyard cried out, unable to believe that Vulmea could avoid the lunge. But chain-lightning was slow compared to the pirate's shift. He ducked, side-stepped, and as the spear whipped past under his arm-pit, he dealt a cut that found no shield in the way. The cutlass was a blinding flicker of steel in the moonlight, ending its arc in a butcher-shop *crunch*. Bigomba fell as a tree falls and lay still. His head had been all but severed from his body.

Vulmea stepped back, panting. His great chest heaved under the tattered shirt, and sweat dripped from his face. At last he had met a man almost his match, and the strain of that terrible encounter left the tendons of his thighs quivering.

“We’ve got to get out of here before the rest of them come,” he gasped, catching up his half of the idol’s necklace. “That smaller corridor must lead to the outside, but those niggers are in it, and we haven’t any torch. Let’s try this door. Maybe we can get out that way.”

The ancient door was a rotten mass of crumbling panels and corroded copper bands. It cracked and splintered under the impact of Vulmea’s heavy shoulder, and through the apertures the pirate felt the stir of fresh air, and caught the scent of a damp river-reek. He drew back to smash again at the door, when a chorus of fierce yells brought him about snarling like a trapped wolf. Swift feet pattered up the tunnel, torches waved, and barbaric shouts re-echoed under the vaulted roof. The white men saw a mass of fierce faces and flashing spears, thrown into relief by the flaring torches, surging up the tunnel. The light of their coming streamed before them. They had heard and interpreted the sounds of combat as they hurried up the tunnel, and now they had sighted their enemies, and they burst into a run, howling like wolves.

“Break the door, quick!” cried Wentyard.

“No time now,” grunted Vulmea. “They’d be on us before we could get through. We’ll make our stand here.”

He ran across the chamber to meet them before they could emerge from the comparatively narrow archway, and Wentyard followed him. Despair gripped the Englishman and in a spasm of futile rage he hurled the half-necklace from him. The glint of its jewels was mockery. He fought down the sick memory of those who waited for him in England as he took his place at the door beside the giant pirate.

As they saw their prey at bay the howls of the oncoming blacks grew wilder. Spears were brandished among the torches – then a shriek of different timbre cut the din. The foremost blacks had almost reached the point where the corridor branched off the tunnel – and out of the corridor raced a frantic figure. It was one of the black men who had gone down it exploring. And behind him came a blood-smeared nightmare. The great serpent had turned at bay at last.

It was among the blacks before they knew what was happening. Yells of hate changed to screams of terror, and in an instant all was madness, a clustering tangle of struggling black bodies and limbs, and that great sinuous cable-like trunk writhing and whipping among them, the wedge-shaped head darting and battering. Torches were knocked against the walls, scattering sparks. One man, caught in the squirming coils, was crushed and killed almost instantly, and others were dashed to the floor or hurled with bone-splintering force against the walls by the battering-ram head, or the lashing, beam-like tail. Shot and slashed as it was, wounded mortally, the great snake clung to life with the horrible vitality of its kind, and in the blind fury of its death throes it became an appalling engine of destruction.

Within a matter of moments the blacks who survived had broken away and were fleeing down the tunnel, screaming their fear. Half a dozen limp and broken bodies lay sprawled behind them, and the serpent, unlooping himself from these victims, swept down the tunnel after the living who fled from him. Fugitives and pursuer vanished into the darkness, from which frantic yells came back faintly.

"God!" Wentyard wiped his brow with a trembling hand. "That might have happened to us!"

"Those niggers who went groping down the corridor must have stumbled onto him lying in the dark," muttered Vulmea. "I guess he got tired of running. Or maybe he knew he had his death-wound and turned back to kill somebody before he died. He'll chase those niggers until either he's killed them all, or died himself. They may turn on him and spear him to death when they get into the open. Pick up your part of the necklace. I'm going to try that door again."

Three powerful drives of his shoulder were required before the ancient door finally gave way. Fresh, damp air poured through, though the interior was dark. But Vulmea entered without hesitation, and Wentyard followed him. After a few yards of groping in the dark, the narrow corridor turned sharply to the left, and they

emerged into a somewhat wider passage, where a familiar, nauseating reek made Wentyard shudder.

"The snake used this tunnel," said Vulmea. "This must be the corridor that branches off the tunnel on the other side of the idol-room. There must be a regular net-work of subterranean rooms and tunnels under these cliffs. I wonder what we'd find if we explored all of them."

Wentyard fervently disavowed any curiosity in that direction, and an instant later jumped convulsively when Vulmea snapped suddenly: "Look there!"

"Where? How can a man look anywhere in this darkness?"

"Ahead of us, damn it! It's light at the other end of this tunnel!"

"Your eyes are better than mine," muttered Wentyard, but he followed the pirate with new eagerness, and soon he too could see the tiny disk of grey that seemed set in a solid black wall. After that it seemed to the Englishman that they walked for miles. It was not that far in reality, but the disk grew slowly in size and clarity, and Wentyard knew that they had come a long way from the idol-room when at last they thrust their heads through a round, vine-crossed opening and saw the stars reflected in the black water of a sullen river flowing beneath them.

"This is the way he came and went, all right," grunted Vulmea.

The tunnel opened in the steep bank and there was a narrow strip of beach below it, probably existent only in dry seasons. They dropped down to it and looked about at the dense jungle walls which hung over the river.

"Where are we?" asked Wentyard helplessly, his sense of direction entirely muddled.

"Beyond the foot of the slopes," answered Vulmea, "and that means we're outside the cordon the Indians have strung around the cliffs. The coast lies in that direction; come on!"

The sun hung high above the western horizon when two men emerged from the jungle that fringed the beach, and saw the tiny bay stretching before them.

Vulmea stopped in the shadow of the trees.

“There’s your ship, lying at anchor where we left her. All you’ve got to do now is hail her for a boat to be sent ashore, and your part of the adventure is over.”

Wentyard looked at his companion. The Englishman was bruised, scratched by briars, his clothing hanging in tatters. He could hardly have been recognized as the trim captain of the *Redoubtable*. But the change was not limited to his appearance. It went deeper. He was a different man than the one who marched his prisoner ashore in quest of a mythical hoard of gems.

“What of you? I owe you a debt that I can never –”

“You owe me nothing,” Vulmea broke in. “I don’t trust you, Wentyard.”

The other winced. Vulmea did not know that it was the cruelest thing he could have said. He did not mean it as cruelty. He was simply speaking his mind, and it did not occur to him that it would hurt the Englishman.

“Do you think I could ever harm you now, after this?” exclaimed Wentyard. “Pirate or not, I could never –”

“You’re grateful and full of the milk of human kindness now,” answered Vulmea, and laughed hardly. “But you might change your mind after you got back on your decks. John Wentyard lost in the jungle is one man; Captain Wentyard aboard his king’s warship is another.”

“I swear –” began Wentyard desperately, and then stopped, realizing the futility of his protestations. He realized, with an almost physical pain, that a man can never escape the consequences of a wrong, even though the victim may forgive him. His punishment now was an inability to convince Vulmea of his sincerity, and it hurt him far more bitterly than the Irishman could ever realize. But he could not expect Vulmea to trust him, he realized miserably. In that moment he loathed himself for what he had been, and for the smug, self-sufficient arrogance which had caused him to ruthlessly trample on all who fell outside the charmed circle of his approval. At that moment there was nothing in the world he desired more than the

firm handclasp of the man who had fought and wrought so tremendously for him; but he knew he did not deserve it.

"You can't stay here!" he protested weakly.

"The Indians never come to this coast," answered Vulmea. "I'm not afraid of the Cimarroons. Don't worry about me." He laughed again, at what he considered the jest of anyone worrying about his safety. "I've lived in the wilds before now. I'm not the only pirate in these seas. There's a rendezvous you know nothing about. I can reach it easily. I'll be back on the Main with a ship and a crew the next time you hear about me."

And turning supply, he strode into the foliage and vanished, while Wentyard, dangling in his hand a jeweled strip of gold, stared helplessly after him.

OceanofPDF.com

Flint's Passing

Bring aft the rum! Life's measure's overfull
And down the sides the splashing liquor slops
To mingle in the unknown seas of Doubt.
Bring aft the rum! The tide is going out;
The breeze has lain, the tattered mainsail drops
Against the mast. And on the battered hull
I hear the drowsy slap of lazy waves.
And through the port I see the sandy beach,
And sullen trees beyond, a swampland dank.
I've known the isles the furtherest tide surge laves –

Now like a stranded hulk I come to die
Beside a shore mud-foul and forest-rank.
Bring aft the rum! And set it just in reach.
I've sailed the seven seas, long, bloody years.
I've seen men die and ships go reeling down –
I might have robbed my fellow man in style
But I was long on force and short on guile –
So 'stead of trade I chose the buccaneers –
Rig aft a plank there, damn you! Sink or drown! – Life is a vain, illusive, fickle thing –

Now nearly done with me – it could not hold
Allurement to allay my thirst – for rum.
Steps on the main companion? Let them come.
Here is the map; let Silver have the gold.
Gems, wenches, rum – aye, I have shed my fling.
I guzzled Life as I have guzzled rum.
Run up the sails – throw off the anchor chain –
The courses sway, the straining braces thrum,
The breezes lift, the scents of ocean come –
Bring aft the rum! I'll put to sea again.

OceanofPDF.com

Red Nails

I

The Skull on the Crag

The woman on the horse reined in her weary steed. It stood with its legs wide-braced, its head drooping, as if it found even the weight of the gold-tassled, red-leather bridle too heavy. The woman drew a booted foot out of the silver stirrup and swung down from the gilt-worked saddle. She made the reins fast to the fork of a sapling, and turned about, hands on her hips, to survey her surroundings.

They were not inviting. Giant trees hemmed in the small pool where her horse had just drunk. Clumps of undergrowth limited the vision that quested under the somber twilight of the lofty arches formed by intertwining branches. The woman shivered with a twitch of her magnificent shoulders, and then cursed.

She was tall, full-bosomed and large-limbed, with compact shoulders. Her whole figure reflected an unusual strength, without detracting from the femininity of her appearance. She was all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments. The latter were incongruous, in view of her present environs. Instead of a skirt she wore short, wide-legged silk breeches, which ceased a hand's breadth short of her knees, and were upheld by a wide silken sash worn as a girdle. Flaring-topped boots of soft leather came almost to her knees, and a low-necked, wide-collared, wide-sleeved silk shirt completed her costume. On one shapely hip she wore a straight double-edged sword, and on the other a long dirk. Her unruly golden hair, cut square at her shoulders, was confined by a band of crimson satin.

Against the background of somber, primitive forest she posed with an unconscious picturesqueness, bizarre and out of place. She should have been posed against a background of sea-clouds, painted masts and wheeling gulls. There was the color of the sea in her wide eyes. And that was as it should have been, because this was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, whose deeds are celebrated in song and ballad wherever seafarers gather.

She strove to pierce the sullen green roof of the arched branches and see the sky which presumably lay about it, but presently gave it up with a muttered oath.

Leaving her horse tied she strode off toward the east, glancing back toward the pool from time to time in order to fix her route in her mind. The silence of the forest depressed her. No birds sang in the lofty boughs, nor did any rustling in the bushes indicate the presence of any small animals. For leagues she had traveled in a realm of brooding stillness, broken only by the sounds of her own flight.

She had slaked her thirst at the pool, but she felt the gnawings of hunger and began looking about for some of the fruit on which she had sustained herself since exhausting the food she had brought in her saddlebags.

Ahead of her, presently, she saw an outcropping of dark, flint-like rock that sloped upward into what looked like a rugged crag rising among the trees. Its summit was lost to view amidst a cloud of encircling leaves. Perhaps its peak rose above the tree-tops, and from it she could see what lay beyond – if, indeed, anything lay beyond but more of this apparently illimitable forest through which she had ridden for so many days.

A narrow ridge formed a natural ramp that led up the steep face of the crag. After she had ascended some fifty feet she came to the belt of leaves that surrounded the rock. The trunks of the trees did not crowd close to the crag, but the ends of their lower branches extended about it, veiling it with their foliage. She groped on in leafy obscurity, not able to see either above or below her; but presently she glimpsed blue sky, and a moment later came out in the clear, hot sunlight and saw the forest roof stretching away under her feet.

She was standing on a broad shelf which was about even with the tree-tops, and from it rose a spire-like jut that was the ultimate peak of the crag she had climbed. But something else caught her attention at the moment. Her foot had struck something in the litter of blown dead leaves which carpeted the shelf. She kicked them aside and looked down on the skeleton of a man. She ran an experienced eye

over the bleached frame, but saw no broken bones nor any sign of violence. The man must have died a natural death; though why he should have climbed a tall crag to die she could not imagine.

She scrambled up to the summit of the spire and looked toward the horizons. The forest roof – which looked like a floor from her vantage-point – was just as impenetrable as from below. She could not even see the pool by which she had left her horse. She glanced northward, in the direction from which she had come. She saw only the rolling green ocean stretching away and away, with only a vague blue line in the distance to hint of the hill-range she had crossed days before, to plunge into this leafy waste.

West and east the view was the same; though the blue hill-line was lacking in those directions. But when she turned her eyes southward she stiffened and caught her breath. A mile away in that direction the forest thinned out and ceased abruptly, giving way to a cactus-dotted plain. And in the midst of that plain rose the walls and towers of a city. Valeria swore in amazement. This passed belief. She would not have been surprized to sight human habitations of another sort – the beehive-shaped huts of the black people, or the cliff-dwellings of the mysterious brown race which legends declared inhabited some country of this unexplored region. But it was a startling experience to come upon a walled city here so many long weeks' march from the nearest outposts of any sort of civilization.

Her hands tiring from clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, she let herself down on the shelf, frowning in indecision. She had come far – from the camp of the mercenaries by the border town of Sukhmet amidst the level grasslands, where desperate adventurers of many races guard the Stygian frontier against the raids that come up like a red wave from Darfar. Her flight had been blind, into a country of which she was wholly ignorant. And now she wavered between an urge to ride directly to that city in the plain, and the instinct of caution which prompted her to skirt it widely and continue her solitary flight.

Her thoughts were scattered by the rustling of the leaves below her. She wheeled cat-like, snatched at her sword; and then she froze motionless, staring wide-eyed at the man before her.

He was almost a giant in stature, muscles rippling smoothly under his skin which the sun had burned brown. His garb was similar to hers, except that he wore a broad leather belt instead of a girdle. Broadsword and poniard hung from this belt.

"Conan, the Cimmerian!" ejaculated the woman. "What are *you* doing on my trail?"

He grinned hardly, and his fierce blue eyes burned with a light any woman could understand as they ran over her magnificent figure, lingering on the swell of her splendid breasts beneath the light shirt, and the clear white flesh displayed between breeches and boot-tops.

"Don't you know?" he laughed. "Haven't I made my admiration for you plain ever since I first saw you?"

"A stallion could have made it no plainer," she answered disdainfully. "But I never expected to encounter you so far from the ale-barrels and meat-pots of Sukhmet. Did you really follow me from Zarallo's camp, or were you whipped forth for a rogue?"

He laughed at her insolence and flexed his mighty biceps.

"You know Zarallo didn't have enough knaves to whip me out of camp," he grinned. "Of course I followed you. Lucky thing for you, too, wench! When you knifed that Stygian officer, you forfeited Zarallo's favor and protection, and you outlawed yourself with the Stygians."

"I know it," she replied sullenly. "But what else could I do? You know what my provocation was."

"Sure," he agreed. "If I'd been there, I'd have knifed him myself. But if a woman must live in the war-camps of men, she can expect such things."

Valeria stamped her booted foot and swore.

"Why won't men let me live a man's life?"

"That's obvious!" Again his eager eyes devoured her. "But you were wise to run away. The Stygians would have had you skinned. That officer's brother followed you; faster than you thought, I don't

doubt. He wasn't far behind you when I caught up with him. His horse was better than yours. He'd have caught you and cut your throat within a few more miles."

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well what?" He seemed puzzled.

"What of the Stygian?"

"Why, what do you suppose?" he returned impatiently. "I killed him, of course, and left his carcass for the vultures. That delayed me, though, and I almost lost your trail when you crossed the rocky spurs of the hills. Otherwise I'd have caught up with you long ago."

"And now you think you'll drag me back to Zarallo's camp?" she sneered.

"Don't talk like a fool," he grunted. "Come, girl, don't be such a spitfire. I'm not like that Stygian you knifed, and you know it."

"A penniless vagabond," she taunted.

He laughed at her.

"What do you call yourself? You haven't enough money to buy a new seat for your breeches. Your disdain doesn't deceive me. You know I've commanded bigger ships and more men than you ever did in your life. As for being penniless – what rover isn't, most of the time? I've squandered enough gold in the sea-ports of the world to fill a galleon. You know that, too."

"Where are the fine ships and the bold lads you commanded, now?" she sneered.

"At the bottom of the sea, mostly," he replied cheerfully. "The Zingarans sank my last ship off the Shemite shore – that's why I joined Zarallo's Free Companions. But I saw I'd been stung when we marched to the Darfar border. The pay was poor and the wine was sour, and I don't like black women. And that's the only kind that came to our camp at Sukhmet – rings in their noses and their teeth filed – bah! Why did you join Zarallo? Sukhmet's a long way from salt water."

"Red Ortho wanted to make me his mistress," she answered sullenly. "I jumped overboard one night and swam ashore when we were anchored off the Kushite coast. Off Zabhela, it was. There a Shemite trader told me that Zarallo had brought his Free Companies

south to guard the Darfar border. No better employment offered. I joined an east-bound caravan and eventually came to Sukhmet."

"It was madness to plunge southward as you did," commented Conan, "but it was wise, too, for Zarallo's patrols never thought to look for you in this direction. Only the brother of the man you killed happened to strike your trail."

"And now what do you intend doing?" she demanded.

"Turn west," he answered. "I've been this far south, but not this far east. Many days' traveling to the west will bring us to the open savannas, where the black tribes graze their cattle. I have friends among them. We'll get to the coast and find a ship. I'm sick of the jungle."

"Then be on your way," she advised. "I have other plans."

"Don't be a fool!" He showed irritation for the first time. "You can't keep on wandering through this forest."

"I can if I choose."

"But what do you intend doing?"

"That's none of your affair," she snapped.

"Yes, it is," he answered calmly. "Do you think I've followed you this far, to turn around and ride off empty-handed? Be sensible, wench. I'm not going to harm you."

He stepped toward her, and she sprang back, whipping out her sword.

"Keep back, you barbarian dog! I'll spit you like a roast pig!"

He halted, reluctantly, and demanded: "Do you want me to take that toy away from you and spank you with it?"

"Words! Nothing but words!" she mocked, lights like the gleam of the sun on blue water dancing in her reckless eyes.

He knew it was the truth. No living man could disarm Valeria of the Brotherhood with his bare hands. He scowled, his sensations a tangle of conflicting emotions. He was angry, yet he was amused and filled with admiration for her spirit. He burned with eagerness to seize that splendid figure and crush it in his iron arms, yet he greatly desired not to hurt the girl. He was torn between a desire to shake her soundly, and a desire to caress her. He knew if he came any nearer her sword would be sheathed in his heart. He had seen

Valeria kill too many men in border forays and tavern brawls to have any illusions about her. He knew she was as quick and ferocious as a tigress. He could draw his broadsword and disarm her, beat the blade out of her hand, but the thought of drawing a sword on a woman, even without intent of injury, was extremely repugnant to him.

"Blast your soul, you hussy!" he exclaimed in exasperation. "I'm going to take off your –"

He started toward her, his angry passion making him reckless, and she poised herself for a deadly thrust. Then came a startling interruption to a scene at once ludicrous and perilous.

"What's that?"

It was Valeria who exclaimed, but they both started violently, and Conan wheeled like a cat, his great sword flashing into his hand. Back in the forest had burst forth an appalling medley of screams – the screams of horses in terror and agony. Mingled with their screams there came the snap of splintering bones.

"Lions are slaying the horses!" cried Valeria.

"Lions, nothing!" snorted Conan, his eyes blazing. "Did you hear a lion roar? Neither did I! Listen at those bones snap – not even a lion could make that much noise killing a horse."

He hurried down the natural ramp and she followed, their personal feud forgotten in the adventurers' instinct to unite against common peril. The screams had ceased when they worked their way downward through the green veil of leaves that brushed the rock.

"I found your horse tied by the pool back there," he muttered, treading so noiselessly that she no longer wondered how he had surprized her on the crag. "I tied mine beside it and followed the tracks of your boots. Watch, now!"

They had emerged from the belt of leaves, and stared down into the lower reaches of the forest. Above them the green roof spread its dusky canopy. Below them the sunlight filtered in just enough to make a jade-tinted twilight. The giant trunks of trees less than a hundred yards away looked dim and ghostly.

"The horses should be beyond that thicket, over there," whispered Conan, and his voice might have been a breeze moving through the

branches.

"Listen!"

Valeria had already heard, and a chill crept through her veins; so she unconsciously laid her white hand on her companion's muscular brown arm. From beyond the thicket came the noisy crunching of bones and the loud rending of flesh, together with the grinding, slobbering sounds of a horrible feast.

"Lions wouldn't make that noise," whispered Conan. "Something's eating our horses, but it's not a lion – Crom!"

The noise stopped suddenly, and Conan swore softly. A suddenly risen breeze was blowing from them directly toward the spot where the unseen slayer was hidden.

"Here it comes!" muttered Conan, half lifting his sword.

The thicket was violently agitated, and Valeria clutched Conan's arm hard. Ignorant of jungle-lore, she yet knew that no animal she had ever seen could have shaken the tall brush like that.

"It must be as big as an elephant," muttered Conan, echoing her thought. "What the devil –" His voice trailed away in stunned silence.

Through the thicket was thrust a head of nightmare and lunacy. Grinning jaws bared rows of dripping yellow tusks; above the yawning mouth wrinkled a saurian-like snout. Huge eyes, like those of a python a thousand times magnified, stared unwinkingly at the petrified humans clinging to the rock above it. Blood smeared the scaly, flabby lips and dripped from the huge mouth.

The head, bigger than that of a crocodile, was further extended on a long scaled neck on which stood up rows of serrated spikes, and after it, crushing down the briars and saplings, waddled the body of a titan, a gigantic, barrel-bellied torso on absurdly short legs. The whitish belly almost raked the ground, while the serrated back-bone rose higher than Conan could have reached on tiptoe. A long spiked tail, like that of a gargantuan scorpion, trailed out behind.

"Back up the crag, quick!" snapped Conan, thrusting the girl behind him. "I don't think he can climb, but he can stand on his hind-legs and reach us –"

With a snapping and rending of bushes and saplings the monster came hurtling through the thickets, and they fled up the rock before him like leaves blown before a wind. As Valeria plunged into the leafy screen a backward glance showed her the titan rearing up fearsomely on his massive hinder legs, even as Conan had predicted. The sight sent panic racing through her. As he reared, the beast seemed more gigantic than ever; his snouted head towered among the trees. Then Conan's iron hand closed on her wrist and she was jerked headlong into the blinding welter of the leaves, and out again into the hot sunshine above, just as the monster fell forward with his front feet on the crag with an impact that made the rock vibrate.

Behind the fugitives the huge head crashed through the twigs, and they looked down for a horrifying instant at the nightmare visage framed among the green leaves, eyes flaming, jaws gaping. Then the giant tusks clashed together futilely, and after that the head was withdrawn, vanishing from their sight as if it had sunk in a pool.

Peering down through broken branches that scraped the rock, they saw it squatting on its haunches at the foot of the crag, staring unblinkingly up at them.

Valeria shuddered.

"How long do you suppose he'll crouch there?"

Conan kicked the skull on the leaf-strewn shelf.

"That fellow must have climbed up here to escape him, or one like him. He must have died of starvation. There are no bones broken. That thing must be a dragon, such as the black people speak of in their legends. If so, it won't leave here until we're both dead."

Valeria looked at him blankly, her resentment forgotten. She fought down a surging of panic. She had proved her reckless courage a thousand times in wild battles on sea and land, on the blood-slippery decks of burning war-ships, in the storming of walled cities, and on the trampled sandy beaches where the desperate men of the Red Brotherhood bathed their knives in one another's blood in their fights for leadership. But the prospect now confronting her congealed her blood. A cutlas stroke in the heat of battle was

nothing; but to sit idle and helpless on a bare rock until she perished of starvation, besieged by a monstrous survival of an elder age – the thought sent panic throbbing through her brain.

"He must leave to eat and drink," she said helplessly.

"He won't have to go far to do either," Conan pointed out. "He's just gorged on horse-meat, and like a real snake, he can go for a long time without eating or drinking again. But he doesn't sleep after eating, like a real snake, it seems. Anyway, he can't climb this crag."

Conan spoke imperturbably. He was a barbarian, and the terrible patience of the wilderness and its children was as much a part of him as his lusts and rages. He could endure a situation like this with a coolness impossible to a civilized person.

"Can't we get into the trees and get away, traveling like apes through the branches?" she asked desperately.

He shook his head. "I thought of that. The branches that touch the crag down there are too light. They'd break with our weight. Besides, I have an idea that devil could tear up any tree around here by its roots."

"Well, are we going to sit here on our rumps until we starve, like that?" she cried furiously, kicking the skull clattering across the ledge. "I won't do it! I'll go down there and cut his damned head off –"

Conan had seated himself on a rocky projection at the foot of the spire. He looked up with a glint of admiration at her blazing eyes and tense, quivering figure, but, realizing that she was in just the mood for any madness, he let none of his admiration sound in his voice.

"Sit down," he grunted, catching her by her wrist and pulling her down on his knee. She was too surprized to resist as he took her sword from her hand and shoved it back in its sheath. "Sit still and calm down. You'd only break your steel on his scales. He'd gobble you up at one gulp, or smash you like an egg with that spiked tail of his. We'll get out of this jam some way, but we shan't do it by getting chewed up and swallowed."

She made no reply, nor did she seek to repulse his arm from about her waist. She was frightened, and the sensation was new to Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. So she sat on her companion's – or captor's – knee with a docility that would have amazed Zarallo, who had anathematized her as a she-devil out of hell's seraglio.

Conan played idly with her curly yellow locks, seemingly intent only upon his conquest. Neither the skeleton at his feet nor the monster crouching below disturbed his mind or dulled the edge of his interest.

The girl's restless eyes, roving the leaves below them, discovered splashes of color among the green. It was fruit, large, darkly crimson globes suspended from the boughs of a tree whose broad leaves were a peculiarly rich and vivid green. She became aware of both thirst and hunger, though thirst had not assailed her until she knew she could not descend from the crag to find food and water.

"We need not starve," she said. "There is fruit we can reach."

Conan glanced where she pointed.

"If we ate that we wouldn't need the bite of a dragon," he grunted. "That's what the black people of Kush call the Apples of Derketa. Derketa is the Queen of the Dead. Drink a little of the juice, or spill it on your flesh, and you'd be dead before you could tumble to the foot of this crag."

"Oh!"

She lapsed into dismayed silence. There seemed no way out of their predicament, she reflected gloomily. She saw no way of escape, and Conan seemed to be concerned only with her supple waist and curly tresses. If he was trying to formulate a plan of escape he did not show it.

"If you'll take your hands off me long enough to climb up on that peak," she said presently, "you'll see something that will surprize you."

He cast her a questioning glance, then obeyed with a shrug of his massive shoulders. Clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, he stared out over the forest roof.

He stood a long moment in silence, posed like a bronze statue on the rock.

"It's a walled city, right enough," he muttered presently. "Was that where you were going, when you tried to send me off alone to the coast?"

"I saw it before you came. I knew nothing of it when I left Sukhmet."

"Who'd have thought to find a city here? I don't believe the Stygians ever penetrated this far. Could black people build a city like that? I see no herds on the plain, no signs of cultivation, or people moving about."

"How could you hope to see all that, at this distance?" she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped down on the shelf.

"Well, the folk of the city can't help us just now. And they might not, if they could. The people of the Black Countries are generally hostile to strangers. Probably stick us full of spears –"

He stopped short and stood silent, as if he had forgotten what he was saying, frowning down at the crimson spheres gleaming among the leaves.

"Spears!" he muttered. "What a blasted fool I am not to have thought of that before! That shows what a pretty woman does to a man's mind."

"What are you talking about?" she inquired.

Without answering her question, he descended to the belt of leaves and looked down through them. The great brute squatted below, watching the crag with the frightful patience of the reptile folk. So might one of his breed have glared up at their troglodyte ancestors, treed on a high-flung rock, in the dim dawn ages. Conan cursed him without heat, and began cutting branches, reaching out and severing them as far from the end as he could reach. The agitation of the leaves made the monster restless. He rose from his haunches and lashed his hideous tail, snapping off saplings as if they had been toothpicks. Conan watched him warily from the corner of his eye, and just as Valeria believed the dragon was about to hurl

himself up the crag again, the Cimmerian drew back and climbed up to the ledge with the branches he had cut. There were three of these, slender shafts about seven feet long, but not larger than his thumb. He had also cut several strands of tough, thin vine.

"Branches too light for spear-hafts, and creepers no thicker than cords," he remarked, indicating the foliage about the crag. "It won't hold our weight – but there's strength in union. That's what the Aquilonian renegades used to tell us Cimmerians when they came into the hills to raise an army to invade their own country. But we always fight by clans and tribes."

"What the devil has that got to do with those sticks?" she demanded.

"You wait and see."

Gathering the sticks in a compact bundle, he wedged his poniard hilt between them at one end. Then with the vines he bound them together, and when he had completed his task, he had a spear of no small strength, with a sturdy shaft seven feet in length.

"What good will that do?" she demanded. "You told me that a blade couldn't pierce his scales –"

“He hasn’t got scales all over him,” answered Conan. “There’s more than one way of skinning a panther.”

Moving down to the edge of the leaves, he reached the spear up and carefully thrust the blade through one of the Apples of Derketa, drawing aside to avoid the darkly purple drops that dripped from

the pierced fruit. Presently he withdrew the blade and showed her the blue steel stained a dull purplish crimson.

"I don't know whether it will do the job or not," quoth he. "There's enough poison there to kill an elephant, but – well, we'll see."

Valeria was close behind him as he let himself down among the leaves. Cautiously holding the poisoned pike away from him, he thrust his head through the branches and addressed the monster.

"What are you waiting down there for, you misbegotten offspring of questionable parents?" was one of his more printable queries. "Stick your ugly head up here again, you long-necked brute – or do you want me to come down there and kick you loose from your illegitimate spine?"

There was more of it – some of it couched in eloquence that made Valeria stare, in spite of her profane education among the seafarers. And it had its effect on the monster. Just as the incessant yapping of a dog worries and enrages more constitutionally silent animals, so the clamorous voice of a man rouses fear in some bestial bosoms and insane rage in others. Suddenly and with appalling quickness, the mastodonic brute reared up on its mighty hind legs and elongated its neck and body in a furious effort to reach this vociferous pigmy whose clamor was disturbing the primeval silence of its ancient realm.

But Conan had judged his distance with precision. Some five feet below him the mighty head crashed terribly but futilely through the leaves. And as the monstrous mouth gaped like that of a great snake, Conan drove his spear into the red angle of the jaw-bone hinge. He struck downward with all the strength of both arms, driving the long poniard blade to the hilt in flesh, sinew and bone.

Instantly the jaws clashed convulsively together, severing the triple-pieced shaft and almost precipitating Conan from his perch. He would have fallen but for the girl behind him, who caught his sword-belt in a desperate grasp. He clutched at a rocky projection, and grinned his thanks back at her.

Down on the ground the monster was wallowing like a dog with pepper in its eyes. He shook his head from side to side, pawed at it, and opened his mouth repeatedly to its widest extent. Presently he got a huge front foot on the stump of the shaft and managed to tear the blade out. Then he threw up his head, jaws wide and spouting blood, and glared up at the crag with such concentrated and intelligent fury that Valeria trembled and drew her sword. The scales along his back and flanks turned from rusty brown to a dull lurid red. Most horribly the monster's silence was broken. The sounds that issued from his blood-streaming jaws did not sound like anything that could have been produced by an earthly creation.

With harsh, grating roars, the dragon hurled himself at the crag that was the citadel of his enemies. Again and again his mighty head crashed upward through the branches, snapping vainly on empty air. He hurled his full ponderous weight against the rock until it vibrated from base to crest. And rearing upright he gripped it with his front legs like a man and tried to tear it up by the roots, as if it had been a tree.

This exhibition of primordial fury chilled the blood in Valeria's veins, but Conan was too close to the primitive himself to feel anything but a comprehending interest. To the barbarian, no such gulf existed between himself and other men, and the animals, as existed in the conception of Valeria. The monster below them, to Conan, was merely a form of life differing from himself mainly in physical shape. He attributed to it characteristics similar to his own, and saw in its wrath a counterpart of his rages, in its roars and bellowings merely reptilian equivalents to the curses he had bestowed upon it. Feeling a kinship with all wild things, even dragons, it was impossible for him to experience the sick horror which assailed Valeria at the sight of the brute's ferocity.

He sat watching it tranquilly, and pointed out the various changes that were taking place in its voice and actions.

"The poison's taking hold," he said with conviction.

"I don't believe it." To Valeria it seemed preposterous to suppose that anything, however lethal, could have any effect on that mountain of muscle and fury.

“There’s pain in his voice,” declared Conan. “First he was merely angry because of the stinging in his jaw. Now he feels the bite of the poison. Look! He’s staggering. He’ll be blind in a few more minutes. What did I tell you?”

For suddenly the dragon had lurched about and went crashing off through the bushes.

“Is he running away?” inquired Valeria uneasily.

“He’s making for the pool!” Conan sprang up, galvanized into swift activity. “The poison makes him thirsty. Come on! He’ll be blind in a few moments, but he can smell his way back to the foot of the crag, and if our scent’s here still, he’ll sit there until he dies. And others of his kind may come at his cries. Let’s go!”

“Down there?” Valeria was aghast.

“Sure! We’ll make for the city! They may cut our heads off there, but it’s our only chance. We may run into a thousand more dragons on the way, but it’s sure death to stay here. If we wait until he dies, we may have a dozen more to deal with. After me, in a hurry!”

He went down the ramp as swiftly as an ape, pausing only to aid his less agile companion, who, until she saw the Cimmerian climb, had fancied herself the equal of any man in the rigging of a ship or on the sheer face of a cliff.

They descended into the gloom below the branches and slid to the ground silently, though Valeria felt as if the pounding of her heart must surely be heard from far away. A noisy gurgling and lapping beyond the dense thicket indicated that the dragon was drinking at the pool.

“As soon as his belly is full he’ll be back,” muttered Conan. “It may take hours for the poison to kill him – if it does at all.”

Somewhere beyond the forest the sun was sinking to the horizon. The forest was a misty twilight place of black shadows and dim vistas. Conan gripped Valeria’s wrist and glided away from the foot of the crag. He made less noise than a breeze blowing among the tree-trunks, but Valeria felt as if her soft boots were betraying their flight to all the forest.

“I don’t think he can follow a trail,” muttered Conan. “But if a wind blew our body-scent to him, he could smell us out.”

“Mitra grant that the wind blow not!” Valeria breathed.

Her face was a pallid oval in the gloom. She gripped her sword in her free hand, but the feel of the shagreen-bound hilt inspired only a feeling of helplessness in her.

They were still some distance from the edge of the forest when they heard a snapping and crashing behind them. Valeria bit her lip to check a cry.

“He’s on our trail!” she whispered fiercely.

Conan shook his head.

“He didn’t smell us at the rock, and he’s blundering about through the forest trying to pick up our scent. Come on! It’s the city or nothing now! He could tear down any tree we’d climb. If only the wind stays down –”

They stole on until the trees began to thin out ahead of them. Behind them the forest was a black impenetrable ocean of shadows. The ominous crackling still sounded behind them, as the dragon blundered in his erratic course.

“There’s the plain ahead,” breathed Valeria. “A little more and we’ll –”

“Crom!” swore Conan.

“Mitra!” whispered Valeria.

Out of the south a wind had sprung up.

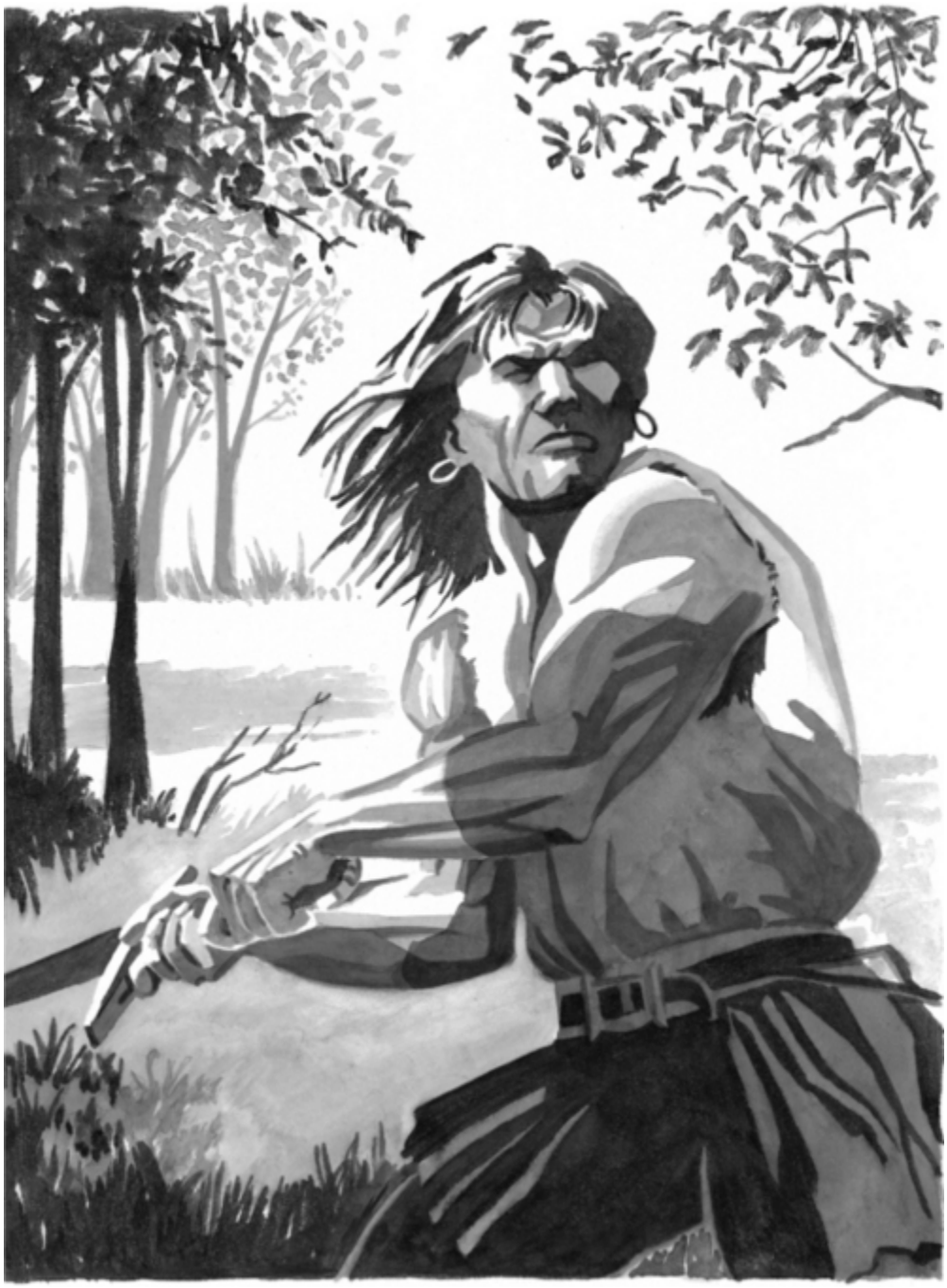
It blew over them directly into the black forest behind them. Instantly a horrible roar shook the woods. The aimless snapping and crackling of the bushes changed to a sustained crashing as the dragon came like a hurricane straight toward the spot from which the scent of his enemies was wafted.

“Run!” snarled Conan, his eyes blazing like those of a trapped wolf. “It’s all we can do!”

Sailors’ boots are not made for sprinting, and the life of a pirate does not train one for a runner. Within a hundred yards Valeria was panting and reeling in her gait, and behind them the crashing gave way to a rolling thunder as the monster broke out of the thickets and into the more open ground.

Conan's iron arm about the woman's waist half lifted her; her feet scarcely touched the earth as she was borne along at a speed she could never have attained herself. If he could keep out of the beast's way for a bit, perhaps that betraying wind would shift – but the wind held, and a quick glance over his shoulder showed Conan that the monster was almost upon them, coming like a war-galley in front of a hurricane. He thrust Valeria from him with a force that sent her reeling a dozen feet to fall in a crumpled heap at the foot of the nearest tree, and the Cimmerian wheeled in the path of the thundering titan.

Convinced that his death was upon him, the Cimmerian acted according to his instinct, and hurled himself full at the awful face that was bearing down on him. He leaped, slashing like a wildcat, felt his sword cut deep into the scales that sheathed the mighty snout – and then a terrific impact knocked him rolling and tumbling for fifty feet with all the wind and half the life battered out of him.



How the stunned Cimmerian regained his feet, not even he could have ever told. But the only thought that filled his brain was of the woman lying dazed and helpless almost in the path of the hurtling fiend, and before the breath came whistling back into his gullet he was standing over her with his sword in his hand.

She lay where he had thrown her, but she was struggling to a sitting posture. Neither tearing tusks nor trampling feet had touched her. It had been a shoulder or front leg that struck Conan, and the blind monster rushed on, forgetting the victims whose scent it had been following, in the sudden agony of its death throes. Headlong on its course it thundered until its low-hung head crashed into a gigantic tree in its path. The impact tore the tree up by the roots and must have dashed the brains from the misshapen skull. Tree and monster fell together, and the dazed humans saw the branches and leaves shaken by the convulsions of the creature they covered – and then grow quiet.

Conan lifted Valeria to her feet and together they started away at a reeling run. A few moments later they emerged into the still twilight of the treeless plain.

Conan paused an instant and glanced back at the ebon fastness behind them. Not a leaf stirred, nor a bird chirped. It stood as silent as it must have stood before Man was created.

"Come on," muttered Conan, taking his companion's hand. "It's touch and go now. If more dragons come out of the woods after us –"

He did not have to finish the sentence.

The city looked very far away across the plain, farther than it had looked from the crag. Valeria's heart hammered until she felt as if it would strangle her. At every step she expected to hear the crashing of the bushes and see another colossal nightmare bearing down upon them. But nothing disturbed the silence of the thickets.

With the first mile between them and the woods, Valeria breathed more easily. Her buoyant self-confidence began to thaw out again. The sun had set and darkness was gathering over the plain, lightened a little by the stars that made stunted ghosts out of the cactus growths.

"No cattle, no plowed fields," muttered Conan. "How do these people live?"

“Perhaps the cattle are in pens for the night,” suggested Valeria, “and the fields and grazing-pastures are on the other side of the city.”

“Maybe,” he grunted. “I didn’t see any from the crag, though.”

The moon came up behind the city, etching walls and towers blackly in the yellow glow. Valeria shivered. Black against the moon the strange city had a somber, sinister look.

Perhaps something of the same feeling occurred to Conan, for he stopped, glanced about him, and grunted: “We stop here. No use coming to their gates in the night. They probably wouldn’t let us in. Besides, we need rest, and we don’t know how they’ll receive us. A few hours’ sleep will put us in better shape to fight or run.”

He led the way to a bed of cactus which grew in a circle – a phenomenon common to the southern desert. With his sword he chopped an opening, and motioned Valeria to enter.

“We’ll be safe from snakes here, anyhow.”

She glanced fearfully back toward the black line that indicated the forest some six miles away.

“Suppose a dragon comes out of the woods?”

“We’ll keep watch,” he answered, though he made no suggestion as to what they would do in such an event. He was staring at the city, a few miles away. Not a light shone from spire or tower. A great black mass of mystery, it reared cryptically against the moonlit sky.

“Lie down and sleep. I’ll keep the first watch.”

She hesitated, glancing at him uncertainly, but he sat down cross-legged in the opening, facing toward the plain, his sword across his knees, his back to her. Without further comment she lay down on the sand inside the spiky circle.

“Wake me when the moon is at its zenith,” she directed.

He did not reply nor look toward her. Her last impression, as she sank into slumber, was of his muscular figure, immobile as a statue hewn out of bronze, outlined against the low-hanging stars.

II

By the Blaze of the Fire Jewels

Valeria awoke with a start, to the realization that a gray dawn was stealing over the plain.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Conan squatted beside the cactus, cutting off the thick pears and dexterously twitching out the spikes.

"You didn't awake me," she accused. "You let me sleep all night!"

"You were tired," he answered. "Your posterior must have been sore, too, after that long ride. You pirates aren't used to horseback."

"What about yourself?" she retorted.

"I was a *kozak* before I was a pirate," he answered. "They live in the saddle. I snatch naps like a panther watching beside the trail for a deer to come by. My ears keep watch while my eyes sleep."

And indeed the giant barbarian seemed as much refreshed as if he had slept the whole night on a golden bed. Having removed the thorns, and peeled off the tough skin, he handed the girl a thick, juicy cactus leaf.

"Skin your teeth in that pear. It's food and drink to a desert man. I was a chief of the Zuagirs once – desert men who live by plundering the caravans."

"Is there anything you haven't been?" inquired the girl, half in derision and half in fascination.

"I've never been king of an Hyborian kingdom," he grinned, taking an enormous mouthful of cactus. "But I've dreamed of being even that. I may be too, some day. Why shouldn't I?"

She shook her head in wonder at his calm audacity, and fell to devouring her pear. She found it not unpleasing to the palate, and full of cool and thirst-satisfying juice. Finishing his meal, Conan wiped his hands in the sand, rose, ran his fingers through his thick black mane, hitched at his sword-belt and said:

"Well, let's go. If the people in that city are going to cut our throats they may as well do it now, before the heat of the day begins."

His grim humor was unconscious, but Valeria reflected that it might be prophetic. She too hitched her sword-belt as she rose. Her terrors of the night were past. The roaring dragons of the distant forest were like a dim dream. There was a swagger in her stride as she moved off beside the Cimmerian. Whatever perils lay ahead of

them, their foes would be men. And Valeria of the Red Brotherhood had never seen the face of the man she feared.

Conan glanced down at her as she strode along beside him with her swinging stride that matched his own.

"You walk more like a hillman than a sailor," he said. "You must be an Aquilonian. The suns of Darfar never burnt your white skin brown. Many a princess would envy you."

"I am from Aquilonia," she replied. His compliments no longer irritated her. His evident admiration pleased her. For another man to have kept her watch while she slept would have angered her; she had always fiercely resented any man's attempting to shield or protect her because of her sex. But she found a secret pleasure in the fact that this man had done so. And he had not taken advantage of her fright and the weakness resulting from it. After all, she reflected, her companion was no common man.

The sun rose behind the city, turning the towers to a sinister crimson.

"Black last night against the moon," grunted Conan, his eyes clouding with the abysmal superstition of the barbarian. "Blood-red as a threat of blood against the sun this dawn. I do not like this city."

But they went on, and as they went Conan pointed out the fact that no road ran to the city from the north.

"No cattle have trampled the plain on this side of the city," said he. "No plowshare has touched the earth for years, maybe centuries. But look: once this plain was cultivated."

Valeria saw the ancient irrigation ditches he indicated, half filled in places, and overgrown with cactus. She frowned with perplexity as her eyes swept over the plain that stretched on all sides of the city to the forest edge, which marched in a vast, dim ring. Vision did not extend beyond that ring.

She looked uneasily at the city. No helmets or spearheads gleamed on battlements, no trumpets sounded, no challenge rang

from the towers. A silence as absolute as that of the forest brooded over the walls and minarets.

The sun was high above the eastern horizon when they stood before the great gate in the northern wall, in the shadow of the lofty rampart. Rust flecked the iron bracings of the mighty bronze portal. Spiderwebs glistened thickly on hinge and sill and bolted panel.

"It hasn't been opened for years!" exclaimed Valeria.

"A dead city," grunted Conan. "That's why the ditches were broken and the plain untouched."

"But who built it? Who dwelt here? Where did they go? Why did they abandon it?"

"Who can say? Maybe an exiled clan of Stygians built it. Maybe not. It doesn't look like Stygian architecture. Maybe the people were wiped out by enemies, or a plague exterminated them."

"In that case their treasures may still be gathering dust and cobwebs in there," suggested Valeria, the acquisitive instincts of her profession waking in her; prodded, too, by feminine curiosity. "Can we open the gate? Let's go in and explore a bit."

Conan eyed the heavy portal dubiously, but placed his massive shoulder against it and thrust with all the power of his muscular calves and thighs. With a rasping screech of rusty hinges the gate moved ponderously inward, and Conan straightened and drew his sword. Valeria stared over his shoulder, and made a sound indicative of surprize.

They were not looking into an open street or court as one would have expected. The opened gate, or door, gave directly into a long, broad hall which ran away and away until its vista grew indistinct in the distance. It was of heroic proportions, and the floor of a curious red stone, cut in square tiles, that seemed to smolder as if with the reflection of flames. The walls were of a shiny green material.

"Jade, or I'm a Shemite!" swore Conan. "Not in such quantity!" protested Valeria.

"I've looted enough from the Khitan caravans to know what I'm talking about," he asserted. "That's jade!"

The vaulted ceiling was of lapis lazuli, adorned with clusters of great green stones that gleamed with a poisonous radiance.

"Green fire-stones," growled Conan. "That's what the people of Punt call them. They're supposed to be the petrified eyes of those prehistoric snakes the ancients called Golden Serpents. They glow like a cat's eyes in the dark. At night this hall would be lighted by them, but it would be a hellishly weird illumination. Let's look around. We might find a cache of jewels."

"Shut the door," advised Valeria. "I'd hate to have to outrun a dragon down this hall."

Conan grinned, and replied: "I don't believe the dragons ever leave the forest."

But he complied, and pointed out the broken bolt on the inner side.

"I thought I heard something snap when I shoved against it. That bolt's freshly broken. Rust has eaten nearly through it. If the people ran away, why should it have been bolted on the inside?"

"They undoubtedly left by another door," suggested Valeria.

She wondered how many centuries had passed since the light of outer day had filtered into that great hall through the open door. Sunlight was finding its way somehow into the hall, and they quickly saw the source. High up in the vaulted ceiling skylights were set in slot-like openings – translucent sheets of some crystalline substance. In the splotches of shadow between them, the green jewels winked like the eyes of angry cats. Beneath their feet the dully lurid floor smoldered with changing hues and colors of flame. It was like treading the floors of hell with evil stars blinking overhead.

Three balustraded galleries ran along on each side of the hall, one above the other.

"A four-storied house," grunted Conan, "and this hall extends to the roof. It's long as a street. I seem to see a door at the other end." Valeria shrugged her white shoulders.

"Your eyes are better than mine, then, though I'm accounted sharp-eyed among the sea-rovers."

They turned into an open door at random, and traversed a series of empty chambers, floored like the hall, and with walls of the same green jade, or of marble or ivory or chalcedony, adorned with friezes of bronze, gold or silver. In the ceilings the green fire-gems were set, and their light was as ghostly and illusive as Conan had predicted. Under the witch-fire glow the intruders moved like specters.

Some of the chambers lacked this illumination, and their doorways showed black as the mouth of the Pit. These Conan and Valeria avoided, keeping always to the lighted chambers.

Cobwebs hung in the corners, but there was no perceptible accumulation of dust on the floor, or on the tables and seats of marble, jade or carnelian which occupied the chambers. Here and there were rugs of that silk known as Khitan which is practically indestructible. Nowhere did they find any windows, or doors opening into streets or courts. Each door merely opened into another chamber or hall.

"Why don't we come to a street?" grumbled Valeria. "This place or whatever we're in must be as big as the king of Turan's seraglio."

"They must not have perished of plague," said Conan, meditating upon the mystery of the empty city. "Otherwise we'd find skeletons. Maybe it became haunted, and everybody got up and left. Maybe –"

"Maybe, hell!" broke in Valeria rudely. "We'll never know. Look at these friezes. They portray men. What race do they belong to?"

Conan scanned them and shook his head.

"I never saw people exactly like them. But there's the smack of the East about them – Vendhya, maybe, or Kosala."

"Were you a king in Kosala?" she asked, masking her keen curiosity with derision.

"No. But I was a war-chief of the Afghulis who live in the Himelian mountains above the borders of Vendhya. These people favor the Kosalans. But why should Kosalans be building a city this far to west?"

The figures portrayed were those of slender, olive-skinned men and women, with finely chiseled, exotic features. They wore filmy

robes and many delicate jeweled ornaments, and were depicted mostly in attitudes of feasting, dancing or love-making.

"Easterners, all right," grunted Conan, "but from where I don't know. They must have lived a disgustingly peaceful life, though, or they'd have scenes of wars and fights. Let's go up that stair."

It was an ivory spiral that wound up from the chamber in which they were standing. They mounted three flights and came into a broad chamber on the fourth floor, which seemed to be the highest tier in the building. Skylights in the ceiling illuminated the room, in which light the fire-gems winked pallidly. Glancing through the doors they saw, except on one side, a series of similarly lighted chambers. This other door opened upon a balustraded gallery that overhung a hall much smaller than the one they had recently explored on the lower floor.

"Hell!" Valeria sat down disgustedly on a jade bench. "The people who deserted this city must have taken all their treasures with them. I'm tired of wandering through these bare rooms at random."

"All these upper chambers seem to be lighted," said Conan. "I wish we could find a window that overlooked the city. Let's have a look through that door over there."

"You have a look," advised Valeria. "I'm going to sit here and rest my feet."

Conan disappeared through the door opposite that one opening upon the gallery, and Valeria leaned back with her hands clasped behind her head, and thrust her booted legs out in front of her. These silent rooms and halls with their gleaming green clusters of ornaments and burning crimson floors were beginning to depress her. She wished they could find their way out of the maze into which they had wandered and emerge into a street. She wondered idly what furtive, dark feet had glided over those flaming floors in past centuries, how many deeds of cruelty and mystery those winking ceiling-gems had blazed down upon.

It was a faint noise that brought her out of her reflections. She was on her feet with her sword in her hand before she realized what

had disturbed her. Conan had not returned, and she knew it was not he that she had heard.

The sound had come from somewhere beyond the door that opened on to the gallery. Soundlessly in her soft leather boots she glided through it, crept across the balcony and peered down between the heavy balustrades.

A man was stealing along the hall.

The sight of a human being in this supposedly deserted city was a startling shock. Crouching down behind the stone balusters, with every nerve tingling, Valeria glared down at the stealthy figure.

The man in no way resembled the figures depicted on the friezes. He was slightly above middle height, very dark, though not negroid. He was naked but for a scanty silk clout that only partly covered his muscular hips, and a leather girdle, a hand's breadth broad, about his lean waist. His long black hair hung in lank strands about his shoulders, giving him a wild appearance. He was gaunt, but knots and cords of muscles stood out on his arms and legs, without that fleshy padding that presents a pleasing symmetry of contour. He was built with an economy that was almost repellent.

Yet it was not so much his physical appearance as his attitude that impressed the woman who watched him. He slunk along, stooped in a semi-crouch, his head turning from side to side. He grasped a wide-tipped blade in his right hand, and she saw it shake with the intensity of the emotion that gripped him. He was afraid, trembling in the grip of some dire terror. When he turned his head she caught the blaze of wild eyes among the lank strands of black hair.

He did not see her. On tiptoe he glided across the hall and vanished through an open door. A moment later she heard a choking cry, and then silence fell again.

Consumed with curiosity, Valeria glided along the gallery until she came to a door above the one through which the man had passed. It opened into another, smaller gallery that encircled a large chamber.

This chamber was on the third floor, and its ceiling was not so high as that of the hall. It was lighted only by the fire-stones, and their weird green glow left the spaces under the balcony in shadows.

Valeria's eyes widened. The man she had seen was still in the chamber.

He lay face down on a dark crimson carpet in the middle of the room. His body was limp, his arms spread wide. His curved sword lay near him.

She wondered why he should lie there so motionless. Then her eyes narrowed as she stared down at the rug on which he lay. Beneath and about him the fabric showed a slightly different color, a deeper, brighter crimson.

Shivering slightly, she crouched down closer behind the balustrade, intently scanning the shadows under the overhanging gallery. They gave up no secret.

Suddenly another figure entered the grim drama. He was a man similar to the first, and he came in by a door opposite that which gave upon the hall.

His eyes glared at the sight of the man on the floor, and he spoke something in a staccato voice that sounded like "Chicmec!" The other did not move.

The man stepped quickly across the floor, bent, gripped the fallen man's shoulder and turned him over. A choking cry escaped him as the head fell back limply, disclosing a throat that had been severed from ear to ear.

The man let the corpse fall back upon the blood-stained carpet, and sprang to his feet, shaking like a wind-blown leaf. His face was an ashy mask of fear. But with one knee flexed for flight, he froze suddenly, became as immobile as an image, staring across the chamber with dilated eyes.

In the shadows beneath the balcony a ghostly light began to glow and grow, a light that was not part of the fire-stone gleam. Valeria felt her hair stir as she watched it; for, dimly visible in the throbbing radiance, there floated a human skull, and it was from this skull – human yet appallingly misshapen – that the spectral light seemed to emanate. It hung there like a disembodied head, conjured out of night and the shadows, growing more and more distinct; human, and yet not human as she knew humanity.

The man stood motionless, an embodiment of paralyzed horror, staring fixedly at the apparition. The thing moved out from the wall and a grotesque shadow moved with it. Slowly the shadow became visible as a man-like figure whose naked torso and limbs shone whitely, with the hue of bleached bones. The bare skull on its shoulders grinned eyelessly, in the midst of its unholy nimbus, and the man confronting it seemed unable to take his eyes from it. He stood still, his sword dangling from nerveless fingers, on his face the expression of a man bound by the spells of a mesmerist.

Valeria realized that it was not fear alone that paralyzed him. Some hellish quality of that throbbing glow had robbed him of his power to think and act. She herself, safely above the scene, felt the subtle impact of a nameless emanation that was a threat to sanity.

The horror swept toward its victim and he moved at last, but only to drop his sword and sink to his knees, covering his eyes with his hands. Dumbly he awaited the stroke of the blade that now gleamed in the apparition's hand as it reared above him like Death triumphant over mankind.

Valeria acted according to the first impulse of her wayward nature. With one tigerish movement she was over the balustrade and dropping to the floor behind the awful shape. It wheeled at the thud of her soft boots on the floor, but even as it turned, her keen blade lashed down, and a fierce exultation swept her as she felt the edge cleave solid flesh and mortal bone.

The apparition cried out gurglingly and went down, severed through shoulder, breast-bone and spine, and as it fell the burning skull rolled clear, revealing a lank mop of black hair and a dark face twisted in the convulsions of death. Beneath the horrific masquerade there was a human being, a man similar to the one kneeling supinely on the floor.

The latter looked up at the sound of the blow and the cry, and now he glared in wild-eyed amazement at the white-skinned woman who stood over the corpse with a dripping sword in her hand.

He staggered up, yammering as if the sight had almost unseated his reason. She was amazed to realize that she understood him. He was gibbering in the Stygian tongue, though in a dialect unfamiliar to her.

"Who are you? Whence come you? What do you in Xuchotl?" Then rushing on, without waiting for her to reply: "But you are a friend – goddess or devil, it makes no difference! You have slain the Burning Skull! It was but a man beneath it, after all! We deemed it a demon *they* conjured up out of the catacombs! *Listen!*"

He stopped short in his ravings and stiffened, straining his ears with painful intensity. The girl heard nothing.

"We must hasten!" he whispered. *"They* are west of the Great Hall! They may be all around us here! They may be creeping upon us even now!"

He seized her wrist in a convulsive grasp she found hard to break. "Whom do you mean by 'they'?" she demanded.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly for an instant, as if he found her ignorance hard to understand.

"They?" he stammered vaguely. "Why – why, the people of Xotalanc! The clan of the man you slew. They who dwell by the eastern gate."

"You mean to say this city is inhabited?" she exclaimed.

"Aye! Aye!" He was writhing in the impatience of apprehension. "Come away! Come quick! We must return to Tecuhltli!"

"Where is that?" she demanded.

"The quarter by the western gate!" He had her wrist again and was pulling her toward the door through which he had first come. Great beads of perspiration dripped from his dark forehead, and his eyes blazed with terror.

"Wait a minute!" she growled, flinging off his hand. "Keep your hands off me, or I'll split your skull. What's all this about? Who are you? Where would you take me?"

He took a firm grip on himself, casting glances to all sides, and began speaking so fast his words tripped over each other.

"My name is Techotl. I am of Tecuhltli. I and this man who lies with his throat cut came into the Halls of Silence to try and ambush

some of the Xotalancas. But we became separated and I returned here to find him with his gullet slit. The Burning Skull did it, I know, just as he would have slain me had you not killed him. But perhaps he was not alone. Others may be stealing from Xotalanc! The gods themselves blench at the fate of those they take alive!"

At the thought he shook as with an ague and his dark skin grew ashy. Valeria frowned puzzledly at him. She sensed intelligence behind this rigmarole, but it was meaningless to her.

She turned toward the skull, which still glowed and pulsed on the floor, and was reaching a booted toe tentatively toward it, when the man who called himself Techotl sprang forward with a cry.

"Do not touch it! Do not even look at it! Madness and death lurk in it. The wizards of Xotalanc understand its secret – they found it in the catacombs, where lie the bones of terrible kings who ruled in Xuchotl in the black centuries of the past. To gaze upon it freezes the blood and withers the brain of a man who understands not its mystery. To touch it causes madness and destruction."

She scowled at him uncertainly. He was not a reassuring figure, with his lean, muscle-knotted frame, and snaky locks. In his eyes, behind the glow of terror, lurked a weird light she had never seen in the eyes of a man wholly sane. Yet he seemed sincere in his protestations.

"Come!" he begged, reaching for her hand, and then recoiling as he remembered her warning. "You are a stranger. How you came here I do not know, but if you were a goddess or a demon, come to aid Tecuhltli, you would know all the things you have asked me. You must be from beyond the great forest, whence our ancestors came. But you are our friend, or you would not have slain my enemy. Come quickly, before the Xotalancas find us and slay us!"

From his repellent, impassioned face she glanced to the sinister skull, smoldering and glowing on the floor near the dead man. It was like a skull seen in a dream, undeniably human, yet with disturbing distortions and malformations of contour and outline. In life the wearer of that skull must have presented an alien and monstrous aspect. Life? It seemed to possess some sort of life of its own. Its jaws yawned at her and snapped together. Its radiance grew

brighter, more vivid, yet the impression of nightmare grew too; it was a dream; all life was a dream – it was Techotl's urgent voice which snapped Valeria back from the dim gulfs whither she was drifting.

"Do not look at the skull! Do not look at the skull!" It was a far cry from across unreckoned voids.

Valeria shook herself like a lion shaking his mane. Her vision cleared. Techotl was chattering: "In life it housed the awful brain of a king of magicians! It holds still the life and fire of magic drawn from outer spaces!"

With a curse Valeria leaped, lithe as a panther, and the skull crashed to flaming bits under her swinging sword. Somewhere in the room, or in the void, or in the dim reaches of her consciousness, an inhuman voice cried out in pain and rage.

Techotl's hand was plucking at her arm and he was gibbering: "You have broken it! You have destroyed it! Not all the black arts of Xotalanc can rebuild it! Come away! Come away quickly, now!"

"But I can't go," she protested. "I have a friend somewhere near by –"

The flare of his eyes cut her short as he stared past her with an expression grown ghastly. She wheeled just as four men rushed through as many doors, converging on the pair in the center of the chamber.

They were like the others she had seen, the same knotted muscles bulging on otherwise gaunt limbs, the same lank blue-black hair, the same mad glare in their wide eyes. They were armed and clad like Techotl, but on the breast of each was painted a white skull.

There were no challenges or war-cries. Like blood-mad tigers the men of Xotalanc sprang at the throats of their enemies. Techotl met them with the fury of desperation, ducked the swipe of a wide-headed blade, and grappled with the wielder, and bore him to the floor where they rolled and wrestled in murderous silence.

The other three swarmed on Valeria, their weird eyes red as the eyes of mad dogs.

She killed the first who came within reach before he could strike a blow, her long straight blade splitting his skull even as his own sword lifted for a stroke. She side-stepped a thrust, even as she parried a slash. Her eyes danced and her lips smiled without mercy. Again she was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, and the hum of her steel was like a bridal song in her ears.

Her sword darted past a blade that sought to parry, and sheathed six inches of its point in a leather-guarded midriff. The man gasped agonizedly and went to his knees, but his tall mate lunged in, in ferocious silence, raining blow on blow so furiously that Valeria had no opportunity to counter. She stepped back coolly, parrying the strokes and watching for her chance to thrust home. He could not long keep up that flailing whirlwind. His arm would tire, his wind would fail; he would weaken, falter, and then her blade would slide smoothly into his heart. A sidelong glance showed her Techotl kneeling on the breast of his antagonist and striving to break the other's hold on his wrist and to drive home a dagger.

Sweat beaded the forehead of the man facing her, and his eyes were like burning coals. Smite as he would, he could not break past nor beat down her guard. His breath came in gusty gulps, his blows began to fall erratically. She stepped back to draw him out – and felt her thighs locked in an iron grip. She had forgotten the wounded man on the floor.

Crouching on his knees, he held her with both arms locked about her legs, and his mate croaked in triumph and began working his way around to come at her from the left side. Valeria wrenched and tore savagely, but in vain. She could free herself of this clinging menace with a downward flick of her sword, but in that instant the curved blade of the tall warrior would crash through her skull. The wounded man began to worry at her bare thigh with his teeth like a wild beast.

She reached down with her left hand and gripped his long hair, forcing his head back so that his white teeth and rolling eyes gleamed up at her. The tall Xotalanc cried out fiercely and leaped in, smiting with all the fury of his arm. Awkwardly she parried the stroke, and it beat the flat of her blade down on her head so that she saw sparks flash before her eyes, and staggered. Up went the sword again, with a low, beast-like cry of triumph – and then a giant form loomed behind the Xotalanc and steel flashed like a jet of blue lightning. The cry of the warrior broke short and he went down like an ox beneath the pole-ax, his brains gushing from his skull that had been split to the throat.

"Conan!" gasped Valeria. In a gust of passion she turned on the Xotalanc whose long hair she still gripped in her left hand. "Dog of hell!" Her blade swished as it cut the air in an upswinging arc with a blur in the middle, and the headless body slumped down, spurting blood. She hurled the severed head across the room.

"What the devil's going on here?" Conan bestrode the corpse of the man he had killed, broadsword in hand, glaring about him in

amazement.

Techotl was rising from the twitching figure of the last Xotalanc, shaking red drops from his dagger. He was bleeding from the stab deep in the thigh. He stared at Conan with dilated eyes.

“What is all this?” Conan demanded again, not yet recovered from the stunning surprize of finding Valeria engaged in a savage battle with these fantastic figures in a city he had thought empty and uninhabited. Returning from an aimless exploration of the upper chambers to find Valeria missing from the room where he had left her, he had followed the sounds of strife that burst on his dumfounded ears.

“Five dead dogs!” exclaimed Techotl, his flaming eyes reflecting a ghastly exultation. “Five slain! Five crimson nails for the black pillar! The gods of blood be thanked!”

He lifted quivering hands on high, and then, with the face of a fiend, he spat on the corpses and stamped on their faces, dancing in his ghoulish glee. His recent allies eyed him in amazement, and Conan asked, in the Aquilonian tongue: “Who is this madman?”

Valeria shrugged her shoulders.

“He says his name’s Techotl. From his babblings I gather that his people live at one end of this crazy city, and these others at the other end. Maybe we’d better go with him. He seems friendly, and it’s easy to see that the other clan isn’t.”

———

Techotl had ceased his dancing and was listening again, his head tilted sidewise, dog-like, triumph struggling with fear in his repellent countenance.

“Come away, now!” he whispered. “We have done enough! Five dead dogs! My people will welcome you! They will honor you! But come! It is far to Tecuhltli. At any moment the Xotalancas may come on us in numbers too great even for your swords.”

“Lead the way,” grunted Conan.

Techotl instantly mounted a stair leading up to the gallery, beckoning them to follow him, which they did, moving rapidly to keep on his heels. Having reached the gallery, he plunged into a door that opened toward the west, and hurried through chamber after chamber, each lighted by skylights or green fire-jewels.

"What sort of a place can this be?" muttered Valeria under her breath.

"Crom knows!" answered Conan. "I've seen *his* kind before, though. They live on the shores of Lake Zuad, near the border of Kush. They're a sort of mongrel Stygians, mixed with another race that wandered into Stygia from the east some centuries ago and were absorbed by them. They're called Tlazitlans. I'm willing to bet it wasn't they who built this city, though."

Techotl's fear did not seem to diminish as they drew away from the chamber where the dead men lay. He kept twisting his head on his shoulder to listen for sounds of pursuit, and stared with burning intensity into every doorway they passed.

Valeria shivered in spite of herself. She feared no man. But the weird floor beneath her feet, the uncanny jewels over her head, dividing the lurking shadows among them, the stealth and terror of their guide, impressed her with a nameless apprehension, a sensation of lurking, inhuman peril.

"They may be between us and Tecuhltli!" he whispered once. "We must beware lest they be lying in wait!"

"Why don't we get out of this infernal palace, and take to the streets?" demanded Valeria.

"There are no streets in Xuchotl," he answered. "No squares nor open courts. The whole city is built like one giant palace under one great roof. The nearest approach to a street is the Great Hall which traverses the city from the north gate to the south gate. The only doors opening into the outer world are the city gates, through which no living man has passed for fifty years."

"How long have you dwelt here?" asked Conan.

"I was born in the castle of Tecuhltli thirty-five years ago. I have never set foot outside the city. For the love of the gods, let us go

silently! These halls may be full of lurking devils. Olmec shall tell you all when we reach Tecuhltli."

So in silence they glided on with the green fire-stones blinking overhead and the flaming floors smoldering under their feet, and it seemed to Valeria as if they fled through hell, guided by a dark-faced, lank-haired goblin.

Yet it was Conan who halted them as they were crossing an unusually wide chamber. His wilderness-bred ears were keener even than the ears of Techotl, whetted though these were by a lifetime of warfare in those silent corridors.

"You think some of your enemies may be ahead of us, lying in ambush?"

"They prowl through these rooms at all hours," answered Techotl, "as do we. The halls and chambers between Tecuhltli and Xotalanc are a disputed region, owned by no man. We call it the Halls of Silence. Why do you ask?"

"Because men are in the chambers ahead of us," answered Conan. "I heard steel clink against stone."

Again a shaking seized Techotl, and he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering.

"Perhaps they are your friends," suggested Valeria.

"We dare not chance it," he panted, and moved with frenzied activity. He turned aside and glided through a doorway on the left which led into a chamber from which an ivory staircase wound down into darkness.

"This leads to an unlighted corridor below us!" he hissed, great beads of perspiration standing out on his brow. "They may be lurking there, too. It may all be a trick to draw us into it. But we must take the chance that they have laid their ambush in the rooms above. Come swiftly, now!"

Softly as phantoms they descended the stair and came to the mouth of a corridor black as night. They crouched there for a moment, listening, and then melted into it. As they moved along, Valeria's flesh crawled between her shoulders in momentary expectation of a

sword-thrust in the dark. But for Conan's iron fingers gripping her arm she had no physical cognizance of her companions. Neither made as much noise as a cat would have made. The darkness was absolute. One hand, outstretched, touched a wall, and occasionally she felt a door under her fingers. The hallway seemed interminable.

Suddenly they were galvanized by a sound behind them. Valeria's flesh crawled anew, for she recognized it as the soft opening of a door. Men had come into the corridor behind them. Even with the thought she stumbled over something that felt like a human skull. It rolled across the floor with an appalling clatter.

"Run!" yelped Techotl, a note of hysteria in his voice, and was away down the corridor like a flying ghost.

Again Valeria felt Conan's hand bearing her up and sweeping her along as they raced after their guide. Conan could see in the dark no better than she, but he possessed a sort of instinct that made his course unerring. Without his support and guidance she would have fallen or stumbled against the wall. Down the corridor they sped, while the swift patter of flying feet drew closer and closer, and then suddenly Techotl panted: "Here is the stair! After me, quick! Oh, quick!"

His hand came out of the dark and caught Valeria's wrist as she stumbled blindly on the steps. She felt herself half dragged, half lifted up the winding stair, while Conan released her and turned on the steps, his ears and instincts telling him their foes were hard at their backs. *And the sounds were not all those of human feet*.

Something came writhing up the steps, something that slithered and rustled and brought a chill in the air with it. Conan lashed down with his great sword and felt the blade shear through something that might have been flesh and bone, and cut deep into the stair beneath. Something touched his foot that chilled like the touch of frost, and then the darkness beneath him was disturbed by a frightful thrashing and lashing, and a man cried out in agony.

The next moment Conan was racing up the winding staircase, and through a door that stood open at the head.

Valeria and Techotl were already through, and Techotl slammed the door and shot a bolt across it – the first Conan had seen since they left the outer gate.

Then he turned and ran across the well-lighted chamber into which they had come, and as they passed through the farther door, Conan glanced back and saw the door groaning and straining under heavy pressure violently applied from the other side.

Though Techotl did not abate either his speed or his caution, he seemed more confident now. He had the air of a man who has come into familiar territory, within call of friends.

But Conan renewed his terror by asking: "What was that thing that I fought on the stair?"

"The men of Xotalanc," answered Techotl, without looking back. "I told you the halls were full of them."

"This wasn't a man," grunted Conan. "It was something that crawled, and it was as cold as ice to the touch. I think I cut it asunder. It fell back on the men who were following us, and must have killed one of them in its death throes."

Techotl's head jerked back, his face ashy again. Convulsively he quickened his pace.

"It was the Crawler! A monster *they* have brought out of the catacombs to aid them! What it is, we do not know, but we have found our people hideously slain by it. In Set's name, hasten! If they put it on our trail, it will follow us to the very doors of Tecuhltli!"

"I doubt it," grunted Conan. "That was a shrewd cut I dealt it on the stair."

"Hasten! Hasten!" groaned Techotl.

They ran through a series of green-lit chambers, traversed a broad hall, and halted before a giant bronze door.

Techotl said: "This is Tecuhltli!"

III

The People of the Feud

Techotl smote on the bronze door with his clenched hand, and then turned sidewise, so that he could watch back along the hall.

“Men have been smitten down before this door, when they thought they were safe,” he said.

“Why don’t they open the door?” asked Conan.

“They are looking at us through the Eye,” answered Techotl. “They are puzzled at the sight of you.” He lifted his voice and called: “Open the door, Xecelan! It is I, Techotl, with friends from the great world beyond the forest! – They will open,” he assured his allies.

“They’d better do it in a hurry, then,” said Conan grimly. “I hear something crawling along the floor beyond the hall.”

Techotl went ashy again and attacked the door with his fists, screaming: “Open, you fools, open! The Crawler is at our heels!”

Even as he beat and shouted, the great bronze door swung noiselessly back, revealing a heavy chain across the entrance, over which spearheads bristled and fierce countenances regarded them intently for an instant. Then the chain was dropped and Techotl grasped the arms of his friends in a nervous frenzy and fairly dragged them over the threshold. A glance over his shoulder just as the door was closing showed Conan the long dim vista of the hall, and dimly framed at the other end an ophidian shape that writhed slowly and painfully into view, flowing in a dull-hued length from a chamber door, its hideous blood-stained head wagging drunkenly. Then the closing door shut off the view.

Inside the square chamber into which they had come heavy bolts were drawn across the door, and the chain locked into place. The door was made to stand the battering of a siege. Four men stood on guard, of the same lank-haired, dark-skinned breed as Techotl, with spears in their hands and swords at their hips. In the wall near the door there was a complicated contrivance of mirrors which Conan guessed was the Eye Techotl had mentioned, so arranged that a narrow, crystal-paned slot in the wall could be looked through from within without being discernible from without. The four guardsmen stared at the strangers with wonder, but asked no question, nor did Techotl vouchsafe any information. He moved with easy confidence now, as if he had shed his cloak of indecision and fear the instant he crossed the threshold.

“Come!” he urged his new-found friends, but Conan glanced toward the door.

“What about those fellows who were following us? Won’t they try to storm that door?”

Techotl shook his head.

“They know they cannot break down the Door of the Eagle. They will flee back to Xotalanc, with their crawling fiend. Come! I will take you to the rulers of Tecuhltli.”

One of the four guards opened the door opposite the one by which they had entered, and they passed through into a hallway which, like most of the rooms on that level, was lighted by both the slot-like skylights and the clusters of winking fire-gems. But unlike the other rooms they had traversed, this hall showed evidences of occupation. Velvet tapestries adorned the glossy jade walls, rich rugs were on the crimson floors, and the ivory seats, benches and divans were littered with satin cushions.

The hall ended in an ornate door, before which stood no guard. Without ceremony Techotl thrust the door open and ushered his friends into a broad chamber, where some thirty dark-skinned men and women lounging on satin-covered couches sprang up with exclamations of amazement.

The men, all except one, were of the same type as Techotl, and the women were equally dark and strange-eyed, though not unbeautiful in a weird dark way. They wore sandals, golden breast-plates, and scanty silk skirts supported by gem-crusted girdles, and their black manes, cut square at their naked shoulders, were bound with silver circlets.

On a wide ivory seat on a jade dais sat a man and a woman who differed subtly from the others. He was a giant, with an enormous sweep of breast and the shoulders of a bull. Unlike the others, he was bearded, with a thick, blue-black beard which fell almost to his broad girdle. He wore a robe of purple silk which reflected changing sheens of color with his every movement, and one wide sleeve, drawn back to his elbow, revealed a forearm massive with corded

muscles. The band which confined his blue-black locks was set with glittering jewels.

The woman beside him sprang to her feet with a startled exclamation as the strangers entered, and her eyes, passing over Conan, fixed themselves with burning intensity on Valeria. She was tall and lithe, by far the most beautiful woman in the room. She was clad more scantily even than the others; for instead of a skirt she wore merely a broad strip of gilt-worked purple cloth fastened to the middle of her girdle which fell below her knees. Another strip at the back of her girdle completed that part of her costume, which she wore with a cynical indifference. Her breast-plates and the circlet about her temples were adorned with gems. In her eyes alone of all the dark-skinned people there lurked no brooding gleam of madness. She spoke no word after her first exclamation; she stood tensely, her hands clenched, staring at Valeria.

The man on the ivory seat had not risen.

“Prince Olmec,” spoke Techotl, bowing low, with arms outspread and the palms of his hands turned upward, “I bring allies from the world beyond the forest. In the Chamber of Tezcoti the Burning Skull slew Chicmec, my companion –”

“The Burning Skull!” It was a shuddering whisper of fear from the people of Tecuhltli.

“Aye! Then came I, and found Chicmec lying with his throat cut. Before I could flee, the Burning Skull came upon me, and when I looked upon it my blood became as ice and the marrow of my bones melted. I could neither fight nor run. I could only await the stroke.

Then came this white-skinned woman and struck him down with her sword; and lo, it was only a dog of Xotalanc with white paint upon his skin and the living skull of an ancient wizard upon his head! Now that skull lies in many pieces, and the dog who wore it is a dead man!"

An indescribably fierce exultation edged the last sentence, and was echoed in the low, savage exclamations from the crowding listeners.

"But wait!" exclaimed Techotl. "There is more! While I talked with the woman, four Xotalancas came upon us! One I slew – there is the stab in my thigh to prove how desperate was the fight. Two the woman killed. But we were hard pressed when this man came into the fray and split the skull of the fourth! Aye! Five crimson nails there are to be driven into the pillar of vengeance!"

He pointed at a black column of ebony which stood behind the dais. Hundreds of red dots scarred its polished surface – the bright scarlet heads of heavy copper nails driven into the black wood.

"Five red nails for five Xotalanca lives!" exulted Techotl, and the horrible exultation in the faces of the listeners made them inhuman.

"Who are these people?" asked Olmec, and his voice was like the low, deep rumble of a distant bull. None of the people of Xuchotl spoke loudly. It was as if they had absorbed into their souls the silence of the empty halls and deserted chambers.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," answered the barbarian briefly. "This woman is Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, an Aquilonian pirate. We are deserters from an army on the Darfar border, far to the north, and are trying to reach the coast."

The woman on the dais spoke loudly, her words tripping in her haste.

"You can never reach the coast! There is no escape from Xuchotl! You will spend the rest of your lives in this city!"

"What do you mean?" growled Conan, clapping his hand to his hilt and stepping about so as to face both the dais and the rest of the room. "Are you telling us we're prisoners?"

"She did not mean that," interposed Olmec. "We are your friends. We would not restrain you against your will. But I fear other

circumstances will make it impossible for you to leave Xuchotl."

His eyes flickered to Valeria, and he lowered them quickly.

"This woman is Tascela," he said. "She is a princess of Tecuhltli. But let food and drink be brought our guests. Doubtless they are hungry, and weary from their long travels."

He indicated an ivory table, and after an exchange of glances, the adventurers seated themselves. The Cimmerian was suspicious. His fierce blue eyes roved about the chamber, and he kept his sword close to his hand. But an invitation to eat and drink never found him backward. His eyes kept wandering to Tascela, but the princess had eyes only for his white-skinned companion.

Techotl, who had bound a strip of silk about his wounded thigh, placed himself at the table to attend to the wants of his friends, seeming to consider it a privilege and honor to see after their needs. He inspected the food and drink the others brought in gold vessels and dishes, and tasted each before he placed it before his guests. While they ate, Olmec sat in silence on his ivory seat, watching them from under his broad black brows. Tascela sat beside him, chin cupped in her hands and her elbows resting on her knees. Her dark, enigmatic eyes, burning with a mysterious light, never left Valeria's supple figure. Behind her seat a sullen handsome girl waved an ostrich-plume fan with a slow rhythm.

The food was fruit of an exotic kind unfamiliar to the wanderers, but very palatable, and the drink was a light crimson wine that carried a heady tang.

"You have come from afar," said Olmec at last. "I have read the books of our fathers. Aquilonia lies beyond the lands of the Stygians and the Shemites, beyond Argos and Zingara; and Cimmeria lies beyond Aquilonia."

"We have each a roving foot," answered Conan carelessly.

"How you won through the forest is a wonder to me," quoth Olmec. "In by-gone days a thousand fighting-men scarcely were able to carve a road through its perils."

“We encountered a bench-legged monstrosity about the size of a mastodon,” said Conan casually, holding out his wine goblet which Techotl filled with evident pleasure. “But when we’d killed it we had no further trouble.”

The wine vessel slipped from Techotl’s hand to crash on the floor. His dusky skin went ashy. Olmec started to his feet, an image of stunned amazement, and a low gasp of awe or terror breathed up from the others. Some slipped to their knees as if their legs would not support them. Only Tascela seemed not to have heard. Conan glared about him bewilderedly.

“What’s the matter? What are you gaping about?”

“You – you slew the dragon-god?”

“God? I killed a dragon. Why not? It was trying to gobble us up.”

“But dragons are immortal!” exclaimed Olmec. “They slay each other, but no man ever killed a dragon! The thousand fighting-men of our ancestors who fought their way to Xuchotl could not prevail against them! Their swords broke like twigs against their scales!”

“If your ancestors had thought to dip their spears in the poisonous juice of Derketa’s Apples,” quoth Conan, with his mouth full, “and jab them in the eyes or mouth or somewhere like that, they’d have seen that dragons are not more immortal than any other chunk of beef. The carcass lies at the edge of the trees, just within the forest. If you don’t believe me, go and look for yourself.”

Olmec shook his head, not in disbelief but in wonder.

“It was because of the dragons that our ancestors took refuge in Xuchotl,” said he. “They dared not pass through the plain and plunge into the forest beyond. Scores of them were seized and devoured by the monsters before they could reach the city.”

“Then your ancestors didn’t build Xuchotl?” asked Valeria.

“It was ancient when they first came into the land. How long it had stood here, not even its degenerate inhabitants knew.”

“Your people came from Lake Zuad?” questioned Conan.

“Aye. More than half a century ago a tribe of the Tlazitlans rebelled against the Stygian king, and, being defeated in battle, fled southward. For many weeks they wandered over grasslands, desert

and hills, and at last they came into the great forest, a thousand fighting-men with their women and children.

"It was in the forest that the dragons fell upon them, and tore many to pieces; so the people fled in a frenzy of fear before them, and at last came into the plain and saw the city of Xuchotl in the midst of it.

"They camped before the city, not daring to leave the plain, for the night was made hideous with the noise of the battling monsters throughout the forest. They made war incessantly upon one another. Yet they came not into the plain.

"The people of the city shut their gates and shot arrows at our people from the walls. The Tlazitlans were imprisoned on the plain, as if the ring of the forest had been a great wall; for to venture into the woods would have been madness.

"That night there came secretly to their camp a slave from the city, one of their own blood, who with a band of exploring soldiers had wandered into the forest long before, when he was a young man. The dragons had devoured all his companions, but he had been taken into the city to dwell in servitude. His name was Tolkemec." A flame lighted the dark eyes at mention of the name, and some of the people muttered obscenely and spat. "He promised to open the gates to the warriors. He asked only that all captives taken be delivered into his hands.

"At dawn he opened the gates. The warriors swarmed in and the halls of Xuchotl ran red. Only a few hundred folk dwelt there, decaying remnants of a once great race. Tolkemec said they came from the east, long ago, from Old Kosala, when the ancestors of those who now dwell in Kosala came up from the south and drove forth the original inhabitants of the land. They wandered far westward and finally found this forest-girdled plain, inhabited then by a tribe of black people.

"These they enslaved and set to building a city. From the hills to the east they brought jade and marble and lapis lazuli, and gold, silver and copper. Herds of elephants provided them with ivory. When their city was completed, they slew all the black slaves. And their magicians made a terrible magic to guard the city; for by their

necromantic arts they re-created the dragons which had once dwelt in this lost land, and whose monstrous bones they found in the forest. Those bones they clothed in flesh and life, and the living beasts walked the earth as they walked it when Time was young. But the wizards wove a spell that kept them in the forest and they came not into the plain.

———

“So for many centuries the people of Xuchotl dwelt in their city, cultivating the fertile plain, until their wise men learned how to grow fruit within the city – fruit which is not planted in soil, but obtains its nourishment out of the air – and then they let the irrigation ditches run dry, and dwelt more and more in luxurious sloth, until decay seized them. They were a dying race when our ancestors broke through the forest and came into the plain. Their wizards had died, and the people had forgot their ancient necromancy. They could fight neither by sorcery nor the sword.

“Well, our fathers slew the people of Xuchotl, all except a hundred which were given living into the hands of Tolkemec, who had been their slave; and for many days and nights the halls re-echoed to their screams under the agony of his tortures.

“So the Tlazitlans dwelt here, for a while in peace, ruled by the brothers Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, and by Tolkemec. Tolkemec took a girl of the tribe to wife, and because he had opened the gates, and because he knew many of the arts of the Xuchotlans, he shared the rule of the tribe with the brothers who had led the rebellion and the flight.

“For a few years, then, they dwelt at peace within the city, doing little but eating, drinking and making love, and raising children. There was no necessity to till the plain, for Tolkemec taught them how to cultivate the air-devouring fruits. Besides, the slaying of the Xuchotlans broke the spell that held the dragons in the forest, and they came nightly and bellowed about the gates of the city. The plain ran red with the blood of their eternal warfare, and it was

then that –" He bit his tongue in the midst of the sentence, then presently continued, but Valeria and Conan felt that he had checked an admission he had considered unwise.

"Five years they dwelt in peace. Then" – Olmec's eyes rested briefly on the silent woman at his side – "Xotalanc took a woman to wife, a woman whom both Tecuhltli and old Tolkemec desired. In his madness, Tecuhltli stole her from her husband. Aye, she went willingly enough. Tolkemec, to spite Xotalanc, aided Tecuhltli. Xotalanc demanded that she be given back to him, and the council of the tribe decided that the matter should be left to the woman. She chose to remain with Tecuhltli. In wrath Xotalanc sought to take her back by force, and the retainers of the brothers came to blows in the Great Hall.

"There was much bitterness. Blood was shed on both sides. The quarrel became a feud, the feud an open war. From the welter three factions emerged – Tecuhltli, Xotalanc, and Tolkemec. Already, in the days of peace, they had divided the city between them. Tecuhltli dwelt in the western quarter of the city, Xotalanc in the eastern, and Tolkemec with his family by the southern gate.

"Anger and resentment and jealousy blossomed into bloodshed and rape and murder. Once the sword was drawn there was no turning back; for blood called for blood, and vengeance followed swift on the heels of atrocity. Tecuhltli fought with Xotalanc, and Tolkemec aided first one and then the other, betraying each faction as it fitted his purposes. Tecuhltli and his people withdrew into the quarter of the western gate, where we now sit. Xuchotl is built in the shape of an oval. Tecuhltli, which took its name from its prince, occupies the western end of the oval. The people blocked up all doors connecting the quarter with the rest of the city, except one on each floor, which could be defended easily. They went into the pits below the city and built a wall cutting off the western end of the catacombs, where lie the bodies of the ancient Xuchotlans, and of those Tlazitlans slain in the feud. They dwelt as in a besieged castle, making sorties and forays on their enemies.

"The people of Xotalanc likewise fortified the eastern quarter of the city, and Tolkemec did likewise with the quarter by the southern

gate. The central part of the city was left bare and uninhabited. Those empty halls and chambers became a battle-ground, and a region of brooding terror.

"Tolkemec warred on both clans. He was a fiend in the form of a human, worse than Xotalanc. He knew many secrets of the city he never told the others. From the crypts of the catacombs he plundered the dead of their grisly secrets – secrets of ancient kings and wizards, long forgotten by the degenerate Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. But all his magic did not aid him the night we of Tecuhltli stormed his castle and butchered all his people. Tolkemec we tortured for many days."

His voice sank to a caressing slur, and a far-away look grew in his eyes, as if he looked back over the years to a scene which caused him intense pleasure.

"Aye, we kept the life in him until he screamed for death as for a bride. At last we took him living from the torture chamber and cast him into a dungeon for the rats to gnaw as he died. From that dungeon, somehow, he managed to escape, and dragged himself into the catacombs. There without doubt he died, for the only way out of the catacombs beneath Tecuhltli is through Tecuhltli, and he never emerged by that way. His bones were never found, and the superstitious among our people swear that his ghost haunts the crypts to this day, wailing among the bones of the dead. Twelve years ago we butchered the people of Tolkemec, but the feud raged on between Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, as it will rage until the last man, the last woman is dead.

"It was fifty years ago that Tecuhltli stole the wife of Xotalanc. Half a century the feud has endured. I was born in it. All in this chamber, except Tascela, were born in it. We expect to die in it.

"We are a dying race, even as those Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. When the feud began there were hundreds in each faction. Now we of Tecuhltli number only these you see before you, and the men who guard the four doors: forty in all. How many Xotalancas there are we do not know, but I doubt if they are much more numerous than we. For fifteen years no children have been born to us, and we have seen none among the Xotalancas.

“We are dying, but before we die we will slay as many of the men of Xotalanc as the gods permit.”

And with his weird eyes blazing, Olmec spoke long of that grisly feud, fought out in silent chambers and dim halls under the blaze of the green fire-jewels, on floors smoldering with the flames of hell and splashed with deeper crimson from severed veins. In that long butchery a whole generation had perished. Xotalanc was dead, long ago, slain in a grim battle on an ivory stair. Tecuhltli was dead, flayed alive by the maddened Xotalancas who had captured him.

Without emotion Olmec told of hideous battles fought in black corridors, of ambushes on twisting stairs, and red butcheries. With a redder, more abysmal gleam in his deep dark eyes he told of men

and women flayed alive, mutilated and dismembered, of captives howling under tortures so ghastly that even the barbarous Cimmerian grunted. No wonder Techotl had trembled with the terror of capture. Yet he had gone forth to slay if he could, driven by hate that was stronger than his fear. Olmec spoke further, of dark and mysterious matters, of black magic and wizardry conjured out of the black night of the catacombs, of weird creatures invoked out of darkness for horrible allies. In these things the Xotalancas had the advantage, for it was in the eastern catacombs where lay the bones of the greatest wizards of the ancient Xuchotlans, with their immemorial secrets.

Valeria listened with morbid fascination. The feud had become a terrible elemental power driving the people of Xuchotl inexorably on to doom and extinction. It filled their whole lives. They were born in it, and they expected to die in it. They never left their barricaded castle except to steal forth into the Halls of Silence that lay between the opposing fortresses, to slay and be slain. Sometimes the raiders returned with frantic captives, or with grim tokens of victory in fight. Sometimes they did not return at all, or returned only as severed limbs cast down before the bolted bronze doors. It was a ghastly, unreal nightmare existence these people lived, shut off from the rest of the world, caught together like rabid rats in the same trap, butchering one another through the years, crouching and creeping through the sunless corridors to maim and torture and murder.

While Olmec talked, Valeria felt the blazing eyes of Tascela fixed upon her. The princess seemed not to hear what Olmec was saying. Her expression, as he narrated victories or defeats, did not mirror the wild rage or fiendish exultation that alternated on the faces of the other Tecuhltli. The feud that was an obsession to her clansmen seemed meaningless to her. Valeria found her indifferent callousness more repugnant than Olmec's naked ferocity.

"And we can never leave the city," said Olmec. "For fifty years no one has left it except those –" Again he checked himself.

“Even without the peril of the dragons,” he continued, “we who were born and raised in the city would not dare leave it. We have never set foot outside the walls. We are not accustomed to the open sky and the naked sun. No; we were born in Xuchotl, and in Xuchotl we shall die.”

“Well,” said Conan, “with your leave we’ll take our chances with the dragons. This feud is none of our business. If you’ll show us to the west gate we’ll be on our way.”

Tascela’s hands clenched, and she started to speak, but Olmec interrupted her: “It is nearly nightfall. If you wander forth into the plain by night, you will certainly fall prey to the dragons.”

“We crossed it last night, and slept in the open without seeing any,” returned Conan.

Tascela smiled mirthlessly. “You dare not leave Xuchotl!”

Conan glared at her with instinctive antagonism; she was not looking at him, but at the woman opposite him.

“I think they dare,” retorted Olmec. “But look you, Conan and Valeria, the gods must have sent you to us, to cast victory into the laps of the Tecuhltli! You are professional fighters – why not fight for us? We have wealth in abundance – precious jewels are as common in Xuchotl as cobblestones are in the cities of the world. Some the Xuchotlans brought with them from Kosala. Some, like the firestones, they found in the hills to the east. Aid us to wipe out the Xotalancas, and we will give you all the jewels you can carry.”

“And will you help us destroy the dragons?” asked Valeria. “With bows and poisoned arrows thirty men could slay all the dragons in the forest.”

“Aye!” replied Olmec promptly. “We have forgotten the use of the bow, in years of hand-to-hand fighting, but we can learn again.”

“What do you say?” Valeria inquired of Conan.

“We’re both penniless vagabonds,” he grinned hardily. “I’d as soon kill Xotalancas as anybody.”

“Then you agree?” exclaimed Olmec, while Techotl fairly hugged himself with delight.

“Aye. And now suppose you show us chambers where we can sleep, so we can be fresh tomorrow for the beginning of the

slaying."

Olmec nodded, and waved a hand, and Techotl and a woman led the adventurers into a corridor which led through a door off to the left of the jade dais. A glance back showed Valeria Olmec sitting on his throne, chin on knotted fist, staring after them. His eyes burned with a weird flame. Tascela leaned back in her seat, whispering to the sullen-faced maid, Yasala, who leaned over her shoulder, her ear to the princess' moving lips.

The hallway was not so broad as most they had traversed, but it was long. Presently the woman halted, opened a door, and drew aside for Valeria to enter.

"Wait a minute," growled Conan. "Where do I sleep?"

Techotl pointed to a chamber across the hallway, but one door farther down. Conan hesitated, and seemed inclined to raise an objection, but Valeria smiled spitefully at him and shut the door in his face. He muttered something uncomplimentary about women in general, and strode off down the corridor after Techotl.

In the ornate chamber where he was to sleep, he glanced up at the slotlike skylights. Some were wide enough to admit the body of a slender man, supposing the glass were broken.

"Why don't the Xotalancas come over the roofs and shatter those skylights?" he asked.

"They cannot be broken," answered Techotl. "Besides, the roofs would be hard to clamber over. They are mostly spires and domes and steep ridges."

He volunteered more information about the "castle" of Tecuhltli. Like the rest of the city it contained four stories, or tiers of chambers, with towers jutting up from the roof. Each tier was named; indeed, the people of Xuchotl had a name for each chamber, hall and stair in the city, as people of more normal cities designate streets and quarters. In Tecuhltli the floors were named The Eagle's Tier, The Ape's Tier, The Tiger's Tier and The Serpent's Tier, in the order as enumerated, The Eagle's Tier being the highest, or fourth, floor.

“Who is Tascela?” asked Conan. “Olmec’s wife?”

Techotl shuddered and glanced furtively about him before answering.

“No. She is – Tascela! She was the wife of Xotalanc – the woman Tecuhltli stole, to start the feud.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Conan. “That woman is beautiful and young. Are you trying to tell me that she was a wife fifty years ago?”

“Aye! I swear it! She was a full-grown woman when the Tlazitlans journeyed from Lake Zuad. It was because the king of Stygia desired her for a concubine that Xotalanc and his brother rebelled and fled into the wilderness. She is a witch, who possesses the secret of perpetual youth.”

“What’s that?” asked Conan.

Techotl shuddered again.

“Ask me not! I dare not speak. It is too grisly, even for Xuchotl!” And touching his finger to his lips, he glided from the chamber.

IV
Scent of Black Lotus

Valeria unbuckled her sword-belt and laid it with the sheathed weapon on the couch where she meant to sleep. She noted that the doors were supplied with bolts, and asked where they led.

“Those lead into adjoining chambers,” answered the woman, indicating the doors on right and left. “That one” – pointing to a copper-bound door opposite that which opened into the corridor – “leads to a corridor which runs to a stair that descends into the catacombs. Do not fear; naught can harm you here.”

“Who spoke of fear?” snapped Valeria. “I just like to know what sort of harbor I’m dropping anchor in. No, I don’t want you to sleep at the foot of my couch. I’m not accustomed to being waited on – not by women, anyway. You have my leave to go.”

Alone in the room, the pirate shot the bolts on all the doors, kicked off her boots and stretched luxuriously out on the couch. She imagined Conan similarly situated across the corridor, but her

feminine vanity prompted her to visualize him as scowling and muttering with chagrin as he cast himself on his solitary couch, and she grinned with gleeful malice as she prepared herself for slumber.

Outside, night had fallen. In the halls of Xuchotl the green fire-jewels blazed like the eyes of prehistoric cats. Somewhere among the dark towers a night wind moaned like a restless spirit. Through the dim passages stealthy figures began stealing, like disembodied shadows.

Valeria awoke suddenly on her couch. In the dusky emerald glow of the fire-gems she saw a shadowy figure bending over her. For a bemused instant the apparition seemed part of the dream she had been dreaming. She had seemed to lie on the couch in the chamber as she was actually lying, while over her pulsed and throbbed a gigantic black blossom so enormous that it hid the ceiling. Its exotic perfume pervaded her being, inducing a delicious, sensuous languor that was something more and less than sleep. She was sinking into scented billows of insensible bliss, when something touched her face. So supersensitive were her drugged senses, that the light touch was like a dislocating impact, jolting her rudely into full wakefulness. Then it was that she saw, not a gargantuan blossom, but a dark-skinned woman standing above her.

With the realization came anger and instant action. The woman turned lithely, but before she could run Valeria was on her feet and had caught her arm. She fought like a wildcat for an instant, and then subsided as she felt herself crushed by the superior strength of her captor. The pirate wrenched the woman around to face her, caught her chin with her free hand and forced her captive to meet her gaze. It was the sullen Yasala, Tascela's maid.

"What the devil were you doing bending over me? What's that in your hand?"

The woman made no reply, but sought to cast away the object. Valeria twisted her arm around in front of her, and the thing fell to the floor – a great black exotic blossom on a jade-green stem, large as a woman's head, to be sure, but tiny beside the exaggerated vision she had seen.

“The black lotus!” said Valeria between her teeth. “The blossom whose scent brings deep sleep. You were trying to drug me! If you hadn’t accidentally touched my face with the petals, you’d have – why did you do it? What’s your game?”

Yasala maintained a sulky silence, and with an oath Valeria whirled her around, forced her to her knees and twisted her arm up behind her back.

“Tell me, or I’ll tear your arm out of its socket!”

Yasala squirmed in anguish as her arm was forced excruciatingly up between her shoulder-blades, but a violent shaking of her head was the only answer she made.

“Slut!” Valeria cast her from her to sprawl on the floor. The pirate glared at the prostrate figure with blazing eyes. Fear and the memory of Tascela’s burning eyes stirred in her, rousing all her tigerish instincts of self-preservation. These people were decadent; any sort of perversity might be expected to be encountered among them. But Valeria sensed here something that moved behind the scenes, some secret terror fouler than common degeneracy. Fear and revulsion of this weird city swept her. These people were neither sane nor normal; she began to doubt if they were even human. Madness smoldered in the eyes of them all – all except the cruel, cryptic eyes of Tascela, which held secrets and mysteries more abysmal than madness.

She lifted her head and listened intently. The halls of Xuchotl were as silent as if it were in reality a dead city. The green jewels bathed the chamber in a nightmare glow, in which the eyes of the woman on the floor glittered eerily up at her. A thrill of panic throbbed through Valeria, driving the last vestige of mercy from her fierce soul.

“Why did you try to drug me?” she muttered, grasping the woman’s black hair, and forcing her head back to glare into her sullen, long-lashed eyes. “Did Tascela send you?”

No answer. Valeria cursed venomously and slapped the woman first on one cheek and then the other. The blows resounded through the room, but Yasala made no outcry.

“Why don’t you scream?” demanded Valeria savagely. “Do you fear someone will hear you? Whom do you fear? Tascela? Olmec? Conan?”

Yasala made no reply. She crouched, watching her captor with eyes baleful as those of a basilisk. Stubborn silence always fans anger. Valeria turned and tore a handful of cords from a nearby hanging.

“You sulky slut!” she said between her teeth. “I’m going to strip you stark naked and tie you across that couch and whip you until you tell me what you were doing here, and who sent you!”

Yasala made no verbal protest, nor did she offer any resistance, as Valeria carried out the first part of her threat with a fury that her captive’s obstinacy only sharpened. Then for a space there was no sound in the chamber except the whistle and crackle of hard-woven silken cords on naked flesh. Yasala could not move her fast-bound hands or feet. Her body writhed and quivered under the chastisement, her head swayed from side to side in rhythm with the blows. Her teeth were sunk into her lower lip and a trickle of blood began as the punishment continued. But she did not cry out.

The pliant cords made no great sound as they encountered the quivering body of the captive; only a sharp crackling snap, but each cord left a red streak across Yasala’s dark flesh. Valeria inflicted the punishment with all the strength of her war-hardened arm, with all the mercilessness acquired during a life where pain and torment were daily happenings, and with all the cynical ingenuity which only a woman displays toward a woman. Yasala suffered more, physically and mentally, than she would have suffered under a lash wielded by a man, however strong.

It was the application of this feminine cynicism which at last tamed Yasala.

A low whimper escaped from her lips, and Valeria paused, arm lifted, and raked back a damp yellow lock. “Well, are you going to talk?” she demanded. “I can keep this up all night, if necessary!”

“Mercy!” whispered the woman. “I will tell.”

Valeria cut the cords from her wrists and ankles, and pulled her to her feet. Yasala sank down on the couch, half reclining on one bare hip, supporting herself on her arm, and writhing at the contact of her smarting flesh with the couch. She was trembling in every limb.

"Wine!" she begged, dry-lipped, indicating with a quivering hand a gold vessel on an ivory table. "Let me drink. I am weak with pain. Then I will tell you all."

Valeria picked up the vessel, and Yasala rose unsteadily to receive it. She took it, raised it toward her lips – then dashed the contents full into the Aquilonian's face. Valeria reeled backward, shaking and clawing the stinging liquid out of her eyes. Through a smarting mist she saw Yasala dart across the room, fling back a bolt, throw open the copper-bound door and run down the hall. The pirate was after her instantly, sword out and murder in her heart.

But Yasala had the start, and she ran with the nervous agility of a woman who has just been whipped to the point of hysterical frenzy. She rounded a corner in the corridor, yards ahead of Valeria, and when the pirate turned it, she saw only an empty hall, and at the other end a door that gaped blackly. A damp moldy scent reeked up from it, and Valeria shivered. That must be the door that led to the catacombs. Yasala had taken refuge among the dead.

Valeria advanced to the door and looked down a flight of stone steps that vanished quickly into utter blackness. Evidently it was a shaft that led straight to the pits below the city, without opening upon any of the lower floors. She shivered slightly at the thought of the thousands of corpses lying in their stone crypts down there, wrapped in their moldering cloths. She had no intention of groping her way down those stone steps. Yasala doubtless knew every turn and twist of the subterranean tunnels.

She was turning back, baffled and furious, when a sobbing cry welled up from the blackness. It seemed to come from a great depth, but human words were faintly distinguishable, and the voice was that of a woman. "Oh, help! Help, in Set's name! Ahhh!" It trailed away, and Valeria thought she caught the echo of a ghostly tittering.

Valeria felt her skin crawl. What had happened to Yasala down there in the thick blackness? There was no doubt that it had been

she who had cried out. But what peril could have befallen her? Was a Xotalanca lurking down there? Olmec had assured them that the catacombs below Tecuhltli were walled off from the rest, too securely for their enemies to break through. Besides, that tittering had not sounded like a human being at all.

Valeria hurried back down the corridor, not stopping to close the door that opened on the stair. Regaining her chamber, she closed the door and shot the bolt behind her. She pulled on her boots and buckled her sword-belt about her. She was determined to make her way to Conan's room and urge him, if he still lived, to join her in an attempt to fight their way out of that city of devils.

But even as she reached the door that opened into the corridor, a long-drawn scream of agony rang through the halls, followed by the stamp of running feet and the loud clangor of swords.

V
Twenty Red Nails

Two warriors lounged in the guardroom on the floor known as the Tier of the Eagle. Their attitude was casual, though habitually alert. An attack on the great bronze door from without was always a possibility, but for many years no such assault had been attempted on either side.

"The strangers are strong allies," said one. "Olmec will move against the enemy tomorrow, I believe."

He spoke as a soldier in a war might have spoken. In the miniature world of Xuchotl each handful of feudists was an army, and the empty halls between the castles was the country over which they campaigned.

The other meditated for a space.

"Suppose with their aid we destroy Xotalanc," he said. "What then, Xatmec?"

"Why," returned Xatmec, "we will drive red nails for them all. The captives we will burn and flay and quarter."

"But afterward?" pursued the other. "After we have slain them all? Will it not seem strange, to have no foes to fight? All my life I

have fought and hated the Xotalancas. With the feud ended, what is left?"

Xatmec shrugged his shoulders. His thoughts had never gone beyond the destruction of their foes. They could not go beyond that.

Suddenly both men stiffened at a noise outside the door.

"To the door, Xatmec!" hissed the last speaker. "I shall look through the Eye –"

Xatmec, sword in hand, leaned against the bronze door, straining his ear to hear through the metal. His mate looked into the mirror. He started convulsively. Men were clustered thickly outside the door; grim, dark-faced men with swords gripped in their teeth – *and their fingers thrust into their ears*. One who wore a feathered head-dress had a set of pipes which he set to his lips, and even as the Tecuhltli started to shout a warning, the pipes began to skirl.

The cry died in the guard's throat as the thin, weird piping penetrated the metal door and smote on his ears. Xatmec leaned frozen against the door, as if paralyzed in that position. His face was that of a wooden image, his expression one of horrified listening. The other guard, farther removed from the source of the sound, yet sensed the horror of what was taking place, the grisly threat that lay in that demoniac fifing. He felt the weird strains plucking like unseen fingers at the tissues of his brain, filling him with alien emotions and impulses of madness. But with a soul-tearing effort he broke the spell, and shrieked a warning in a voice he did not recognize as his own.

But even as he cried out, the music changed to an unbearable shrilling that was like a knife in the ear-drums. Xatmec screamed in sudden agony, and all the sanity went out of his face like a flame blown out in a wind. Like a madman he ripped loose the chain, tore open the door and rushed out into the hall, sword lifted before his mate could stop him. A dozen blades struck him down, and over his mangled body the Xotalancas surged into the guardroom, with a long-drawn, blood-mad yell that sent the unwonted echoes reverberating.

His brain reeling from the shock of it all, the remaining guard leaped to meet them with goring spear. The horror of the sorcery he

had just witnessed was submerged in the stunning realization that the enemy were in Tecuhltli. And as his spearhead ripped through a dark-skinned belly he knew no more, for a swinging sword crushed his skull, even as wild-eyed warriors came pouring in from the chambers behind the guardroom.

It was the yelling of men and the clanging of steel that brought Conan bounding from his couch, wide awake and broadsword in hand. In an instant he had reached the door and flung it open, and was glaring out into the corridor just as Techotl rushed up it, eyes blazing madly.

"The Xotalancas!" he screamed, in a voice hardly human. *"They are within the door!"*

Conan ran down the corridor, even as Valeria emerged from her chamber.

"What the devil is it?" she called.

"Techotl says the Xotalancas are in," he answered hurriedly. "That racket sounds like it."

With the Tecuhltli on their heels they burst into the throneroom and were confronted by a scene beyond the most frantic dream of blood and fury. Twenty men and women, their black hair streaming, and the white skulls gleaming on their breasts, were locked in combat with the people of Tecuhltli. The women on both sides fought as madly as the men, and already the room and the hall beyond were strewn with corpses.

Olmec, naked but for a breech-clout, was fighting before his throne, and as the adventurers entered, Tascela ran from an inner chamber with a sword in her hand.

Xatmec and his mate were dead, so there was none to tell the Tecuhltli how their foes had found their way into their citadel. Nor was there any to say what had prompted that mad attempt. But the losses of the Xotalancas had been greater, their position more desperate, than the Tecuhltli had known. The maiming of their scaly ally, the destruction of the Burning Skull, and the news, gasped by a dying man, that mysterious white-skin allies had joined their enemies, had driven them to the frenzy of desperation and the wild determination to die dealing death to their ancient foes.

The Tecuhltli, recovering from the first stunning shock of the surprize that had swept them back into the throneroom and littered the floor with their corpses, fought back with an equally desperate fury, while the door-guards from the lower floors came racing to hurl themselves into the fray. It was the death-fight of rabid wolves, blind, panting, merciless. Back and forth it surged, from door to dais, blades whickering and striking into flesh, blood spurting, feet stamping the crimson floor where redder pools were forming. Ivory tables crashed over, seats were splintered, velvet hangings torn down were stained red. It was the bloody climax of a bloody half-century, and every man there sensed it.

But the conclusion was inevitable. The Tecuhltli outnumbered the invaders almost two to one, and they were heartened by that fact and by the entrance into the mêlée of their light-skinned allies.

These crashed into the fray with the devastating effect of a hurricane plowing through a grove of saplings. In sheer strength no three Tlazitlans were a match for Conan, and in spite of his weight he was quicker on his feet than any of them. He moved through the whirling, eddying mass with the surety and destructiveness of a gray wolf amidst a pack of alley curs, and he strode over a wake of crumpled figures.

Valeria fought beside him, her lips smiling and her eyes blazing. She was stronger than the average man, and far quicker and more ferocious. Her sword was like a living thing in her hand. Where Conan beat down opposition by the sheer weight and power of his blows, breaking spears, splitting skulls and cleaving bosoms to the breastbone, Valeria brought into action a finesse of sword-play that dazzled and bewildered her antagonists before it slew them. Again and again a warrior, heaving high his heavy blade, found her point in his jugular before he could strike. Conan, towering above the field, strode through the welter smiting right and left, but Valeria moved like an illusive phantom, constantly shifting, and thrusting and slashing as she shifted. Swords missed her again and again as the wielders flailed the empty air and died with her point in their hearts or throats, and her mocking laughter in their ears.

Neither sex nor condition was considered by the maddened combatants. The five women of the Xotalancas were down with their throats cut before Conan and Valeria entered the fray, and when a man or woman went down under the stamping feet, there was always a knife ready for the helpless throat, or a sandaled foot eager to crush the prostrate skull.

From wall to wall, from door to door rolled the waves of combat, spilling over into adjoining chambers. And presently only Tecuhltli and their white-skinned allies stood upright in the great throneroom. The survivors stared bleakly and blankly at each other, like survivors after Judgment Day or the destruction of the world. On legs wide-braced, hands gripping notched and dripping swords,

blood trickling down their arms, they stared at one another across the mangled corpses of friends and foes. They had no breath left to shout, but a bestial mad howling rose from their lips. It was not a human cry of triumph. It was the howling of a rabid wolf-pack stalking among the bodies of its victims.

Conan caught Valeria's arm and turned her about.

"You've got a stab in the calf of your leg," he growled.

She glanced down, for the first time aware of a stinging in the muscles of her leg. Some dying man on the floor had fleshed his dagger with his last effort.

"You look like a butcher yourself," she laughed. He shook a red shower from his hands.

"Not mine. Oh, a scratch here and there. Nothing to bother about. But that calf ought to be bandaged."

Olmec came through the litter, looking like a ghoul with his naked massive shoulders splashed with blood, and his black beard dabbled in crimson. His eyes were red, like the reflection of flame on black water.

"We have won!" he croaked dazedly. "The feud is ended! The dogs of Xotalanc lie dead! Oh, for a captive to flay alive! Yet it is good to look upon their dead faces. Twenty dead dogs! Twenty red nails for the black column!"

"You'd best see to your wounded," grunted Conan, turning away from him. "Here, girl, let me see that leg."

"Wait a minute!" she shook him off impatiently. The fire of fighting still burned brightly in her soul. "How do we know these are all of them? These might have come on a raid of their own."

"They would not split the clan on a foray like this," said Olmec, shaking his head, and regaining some of his ordinary intelligence. Without his purple robe the man seemed less like a prince than some repellent beast of prey. "I will stake my head upon it that we have slain them all. There were less of them than I dreamed, and they must have been desperate. But how came they in Tecuhltli?"

Tascela came forward, wiping her sword on her naked thigh, and holding in her other hand an object she had taken from the body of the feathered leader of the Xotalancas.

"The pipes of madness," she said. "A warrior tells me that Xatmec opened the door to the Xotalancas and was cut down as they stormed into the guardroom. This warrior came to the guardroom from the inner hall just in time to see it happen and to hear the last of a weird strain of music which froze his very soul. Tolkemec used to talk of these pipes, which the Xuchotlans swore were hidden somewhere in the catacombs with the bones of the ancient wizard who used them in his lifetime. Somehow the dogs of Xotalanc found them and learned their secret."

"Somebody ought to go to Xotalanc and see if any remain alive," said Conan. "I'll go if somebody will guide me."

Olmec glanced at the remnants of his people. There were only twenty left alive, and of these several lay groaning on the floor. Tascela was the only one of the Tecuhltli who had escaped without a wound. The princess was untouched, though she had fought as savagely as any.

"Who will go with Conan to Xotalanc?" asked Olmec.

Techotl limped forward. The wound in his thigh had started bleeding afresh, and he had another gash across his ribs.

"I will go!"

"No, you won't," vetoed Conan. "And you're not going either, Valeria. In a little while that leg will be getting stiff."

"I will go," volunteered a warrior, who was knotting a bandage about a slashed forearm.

"Very well, Yanath. Go with the Cimmerian. And you, too, Topal." Olmec indicated another man whose injuries were slight. "But first aid us to lift the badly wounded on these couches where we may bandage their hurts."

This was done quickly. As they stooped to pick up a woman who had been stunned by a war-club, Olmec's beard brushed Topal's ear. Conan thought the prince muttered something to the warrior, but he could not be sure. A few moments later he was leading his companions down the hall.

Conan glanced back as he went out the door, at that shambles where the dead lay on the smoldering floor, blood-stained dark limbs knotted in attitudes of fierce muscular effort, dark faces frozen in masks of hate, glassy eyes glaring up at the green fire-jewels which bathed the ghastly scene in a dusky emerald witch-light. Among the dead the living moved aimlessly, like people moving in a trance. Conan heard Olmec call a woman and direct her to bandage Valeria's leg. The pirate followed the woman into an adjoining chamber, already beginning to limp slightly.

Warily the two Tecuhltli led Conan along the hall beyond the bronze door, and through chamber after chamber shimmering in the green fire. They saw no one, heard no sound. After they crossed the Great Hall which bisected the city from north to south, their caution was increased by the realization of their nearness to enemy territory. But chambers and halls lay empty to their wary gaze, and they came at last along a broad dim hallway and halted before a bronze door similar to the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli. Gingerly they tried it, and it opened silently under their fingers. Awed, they stared into the green-lit chambers beyond. For fifty years no Tecuhltli had entered those halls save as a prisoner going to a hideous doom. To go to Xotalanc had been the ultimate horror that could befall a man of the western castle. The terror of it had stalked through their dreams since earliest childhood. To Yanath and Topal that bronze door was like the portal of hell.

They cringed back, unreasoning horror in their eyes, and Conan pushed past them and strode into Xotalanc.

Timidly they followed him. As each man set foot over the threshold he stared and glared wildly about him. But only their quick, hurried breathing disturbed the silence.

They had come into a square guardroom, like that behind the Eagle Door of Tecuhltli, and, similarly, a hall ran away from it to a broad chamber that was a counterpart of Olmec's throneroom.

Conan glanced down the hall with its rugs and divans and hangings, and stood listening intently. He heard no noise, and the

rooms had an empty feel. He did not believe there were any Xotalancas left alive in Xuchotl.

"Come on," he muttered, and started down the hall.

He had not gone far when he was aware that only Yanath was following him. He wheeled back to see Topal standing in an attitude of horror, one arm out as if to fend off some threatening peril, his distended eyes fixed with hypnotic intensity on something protruding from behind a divan.

"What the devil?" Then Conan saw what Topal was staring at, and he felt a faint twitching of the skin between his giant shoulders. A monstrous head protruded from behind the divan, a reptilian head, broad as the head of a crocodile, with down-curving fangs that projected over the lower jaw. But there was an unnatural limpness about the thing, and the hideous eyes were glazed.

Conan peered behind the couch. It was a great serpent which lay there limp in death, but such a serpent as he had never seen in his wanderings. The reek and chill of the deep black earth were about it, and its color was an indeterminable hue which changed with each new angle from which he surveyed it. A great wound in the neck showed what had caused its death.

"It is the Crawler!" whispered Yanath.

"It's the thing I slashed on the stair," grunted Conan. "After it trailed us to the Eagle Door, it dragged itself here to die. How could the Xotalancas control such a brute?"

The Tecuhltli shivered and shook their heads.

"They brought it up from the black tunnels *below* the catacombs. They discovered secrets unknown to Tecuhltli."

"Well, it's dead, and if they'd had any more of them, they'd have brought them along when they came to Tecuhltli. Come on."

They crowded close at his heels as he strode down the hall and thrust on the silver-worked door at the other end.

"If we don't find anybody on this floor," he said, "we'll descend into the lower floors. We'll explore Xotalanc from the roof to the catacombs. If Xotalanc is like Tecuhltli, all the rooms and halls in this tier will be lighted – what the devil!"

They had come into the broad throne-chamber, so similar to that one in Tecuhltli. There were the same jade dais and ivory seat, the same divans, rugs and hangings on the walls. No black, red-scarred column stood behind the throne-dais, but evidences of the grim feud were not lacking.

Ranged along the wall behind the dais were rows of glass-covered shelves. And on those shelves hundreds of human heads, perfectly preserved, stared at the startled watchers with emotionless eyes, as they had stared for only the gods knew how many months and years.

Topal muttered a curse, but Yanath stood silent, the mad light growing in his wide eyes. Conan frowned, knowing that Tlazitlan sanity was hung on a hair-trigger.

Suddenly Yanath pointed to the ghastly relics with a twitching finger.

"There is my brother's head!" he murmured. "And there is my father's younger brother! And there beyond them is my sister's eldest son!"

Suddenly he began to weep, dry-eyed, with harsh, loud sobs that shook his frame. He did not take his eyes from the heads. His sobs grew shriller, changed to frightful, high-pitched laughter, and that in turn became an unbearable screaming. Yanath was stark mad.

Conan laid a hand on his shoulder, and as if the touch had released all the frenzy in his soul, Yanath screamed and whirled, striking at the Cimmerian with his sword. Conan parried the blow, and Topal tried to catch Yanath's arm. But the madman avoided him and with froth flying from his lips, he drove his sword deep into Topal's body. Topal sank down with a groan, and Yanath whirled for an instant like a crazy dervish; then he ran at the shelves and began hacking at the glass with his sword, screeching blasphemously.

Conan sprang at him from behind, trying to catch him unaware and disarm him, but the madman wheeled and lunged at him, screaming like a lost soul. Realizing that the warrior was hopelessly

insane, the Cimmerian side-stepped, and as the maniac went past, he swung a cut that severed the shoulder-bone and breast, and dropped the man dead beside his dying victim.

Conan bent over Topal, seeing that the man was at his last gasp. It was useless to seek to stanch the blood gushing from the horrible wound.

"You're done for, Topal," grunted Conan. "Any word you want to send to your people?"

"Bend closer," gasped Topal, and Conan complied – and an instant later caught the man's wrist as Topal struck at his breast with a dagger. "Crom!" swore Conan. "Are you mad, too?"

"Olmec ordered it!" gasped the dying man. "I know not why. As we lifted the wounded upon the couches he whispered to me, bidding me to slay you as we returned to Tecuhltli –" And with the name of his clan on his lips, Topal died.

Conan scowled down at him in puzzlement. This whole affair had an aspect of lunacy. Was Olmec mad, too? Were all the Tecuhltli madder than he had realized? With a shrug of his shoulders he strode down the hall and out of the bronze door, leaving the dead Tecuhltli lying before the staring dead eyes of their kinsmen's heads.

Conan needed no guide back through the labyrinth they had traversed. His primitive instinct of direction led him unerringly along the route they had come. He traversed it as warily as he had before, his sword in his hand, and his eyes fiercely searching each shadowed nook and corner; for it was his former allies he feared now, not the ghosts of the slain Xotalancas.

He had crossed the Great Hall and entered the chambers beyond when he heard something moving ahead of him – something which gasped and panted, and moved with a strange, floundering, scrambling noise. A moment later Conan saw a man crawling over the flaming floor toward him – a man whose progress left a broad bloody smear on the smoldering surface. It was Techotl and his eyes were already glazing; from a deep gash in his breast blood gushed steadily between the fingers of his clutching hand. With the other he clawed and hitched himself along.

“Conan,” he cried chokingly, “Conan! Olmec has taken the yellow-haired woman!”

“So that’s why he told Topal to kill me!” murmured Conan, dropping to his knee beside the man, who his experienced eye told him was dying. “Olmec isn’t so mad as I thought.”

Techotl’s groping fingers plucked at Conan’s arm. In the cold, loveless and altogether hideous life of the Tecuhltli his admiration and affection for the invaders from the outer world formed a warm, human oasis, constituted a tie that connected him with a more natural humanity that was totally lacking in his fellows, whose only emotions were hate, lust and the urge of sadistic cruelty.

“I sought to oppose him,” gurgled Techotl, blood bubbling frothily to his lips. “But he struck me down. He thought he had slain me, but I crawled away. Ah, Set, how far I have crawled in my own blood! Beware, Conan! Olmec may have set an ambush for your return! Slay Olmec! He is a beast. Take Valeria and flee! Fear not to traverse the forest. Olmec and Tascela lied about the dragons. They slew each other years ago, all save the strongest. For a dozen years there has been only one dragon. If you have slain him, there is naught in the forest to harm you. He was the god Olmec worshipped; and Olmec fed human sacrifices to him, the very old and the very young, bound and hurled from the wall. Hasten! Olmec has taken Valeria to the Chamber of the –”

His head slumped down and he was dead before it came to rest on the floor.

Conan sprang up, his eyes like live coals. So that was Olmec’s game, having first used the strangers to destroy his foes! He should have known that something of the sort would be going on in that black-bearded degenerate’s mind.

The Cimmerian started toward Tecuhltli with reckless speed. Rapidly he reckoned the numbers of his former allies. Only twenty-one, counting Olmec, had survived that fiendish battle in the throneroom. Three had died since, which left seventeen enemies

with which to reckon. In his rage Conan felt capable of accounting for the whole clan single-handed.

But the innate craft of the wilderness rose to guide his berserk rage. He remembered Techotl's warning of an ambush. It was quite probable that the prince would make such provisions, on the chance that Topal might have failed to carry out his order. Olmec would be expecting him to return by the same route he had followed in going to Xotalanc.

Conan glanced up at a skylight under which he was passing and caught the blurred glimmer of stars. They had not yet begun to pale for dawn. The events of the night had been crowded into a comparatively short space of time.

He turned aside from his direct course and descended a winding staircase to the floor below. He did not know where the door was to be found that let into the castle on that level, but he knew he could find it. How he was to force the locks he did not know; he believed that the doors of Tecuhltli would all be locked and bolted, if for no other reason than the habits of half a century. But there was nothing else but to attempt it.

Sword in hand, he hurried noiselessly on through a maze of green-lit or shadowy rooms and halls. He knew he must be near Tecuhltli, when a sound brought him up short. He recognized it for what it was – a human being trying to cry out through a stifling gag. It came from somewhere ahead of him, and to the left. In those deathly-still chambers a small sound carried a long way.

Conan turned aside and went seeking after the sound, which continued to be repeated. Presently he was glaring through a doorway upon a weird scene. In the room into which he was looking a low rack-like frame of iron lay on the floor, and a giant figure was bound prostrate upon it. His head rested on a bed of iron spikes, which were already crimson-pointed with blood where they had pierced his scalp. A peculiar harness-like contrivance was fastened about his head, though in such a manner that the leather band did not protect his scalp from the spikes. This harness was connected by a slender chain to the mechanism that upheld a huge iron ball which was suspended above the captive's hairy breast. As long as

the man could force himself to remain motionless the iron ball hung in its place. But when the pain of the iron points caused him to lift his head, the ball lurched downward a few inches. Presently his aching neck muscles would no longer support his head in its unnatural position and it would fall back on the spikes again. It was obvious that eventually the ball would crush him to a pulp, slowly and inexorably. The victim was gagged, and above the gag his great black ox-eyes rolled wildly toward the man in the doorway, who stood in silent amazement. The man on the rack was Olmec, prince of Tecuhltli.

VI
The Eyes of Tascela

"Why did you bring me into this chamber to bandage my legs?" demanded Valeria. "Couldn't you have done it just as well in the throneroom?"

She sat on a couch with her wounded leg extended upon it, and the Tecuhltli woman had just bound it with silk bandages. Valeria's red-stained sword lay on the couch beside her.

She frowned as she spoke. The woman had done her task silently and efficiently, but Valeria liked neither the lingering, caressing touch of her slim fingers nor the expression in her eyes.

"They have taken the rest of the wounded into the other chambers," answered the woman in the soft speech of the Tecuhltli women, which somehow did not suggest either softness or gentleness in the speakers. A little while before, Valeria had seen this same woman stab a Xotalanca woman through the breast and stamp the eyeballs out of a wounded Xotalanca man.

"They will be carrying the corpses of the dead down into the catacombs," she added, "lest the ghosts escape into the chambers and dwell there."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" asked Valeria.

"I know the ghost of Tolkemec dwells in the catacombs," she answered with a shiver. "Once I saw it, as I crouched in a crypt among the bones of a dead queen. It passed by in the form of an

ancient man with flowing white beard and locks, and luminous eyes that blazed in the darkness. It was Tolkemec; I saw him living when I was a child and he was being tortured."

Her voice sank to a fearful whisper: "Olmec laughs, but I *know* Tolkemec's ghost dwells in the catacombs! They say it is rats which gnaw the flesh from the bones of the newly dead – but ghosts eat flesh. Who knows but that –"

She glanced up quickly as a shadow fell across the couch. Valeria looked up to see Olmec gazing down at her. The prince had cleansed his hands, torso and beard of the blood that had splashed them; but he had not donned his robe, and his great dark-skinned hairless body and limbs renewed the impression of strength bestial in its nature. His deep black eyes burned with a more elemental light, and there was the suggestion of a twitching in the fingers that tugged at his thick blue-black beard.

He stared fixedly at the woman, and she rose and glided from the chamber. As she passed through the door she cast a look over her shoulder at Valeria, a glance full of cynical derision and obscene mockery.

"She has done a clumsy job," criticized the prince, coming to the divan and bending over the bandage. "Let me see –"

With a quickness amazing in one of his bulk he snatched her sword and threw it across the chamber. His next move was to catch her in his giant arms.

Quick and unexpected as the move was, she almost matched it; for even as he grabbed her, her dirk was in her hand and she stabbed murderously at his throat. More by luck than skill he caught her wrist, and then began a savage wrestling-match. She fought him with fists, feet, knees, teeth and nails, with all the strength of her magnificent body and all the knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting she had acquired in her years of roving and fighting on sea and land. It availed her nothing against his brute strength. She lost her dirk in the first moment of contact, and thereafter found herself powerless to inflict any appreciable pain on her giant attacker.

The blaze in his weird black eyes did not alter, and their expression filled her with fury, fanned by the sardonic smile that

seemed carved upon his bearded lips. Those eyes and that smile contained all the cruel cynicism that seethes below the surface of a sophisticated and degenerate race, and for the first time in her life Valeria experienced fear of a man. It was like struggling against some huge elemental force; his iron arms thwarted her efforts with an ease that sent panic racing through her limbs. He seemed impervious to any pain she could inflict. Only once, when she sank her white teeth savagely into his wrist so that the blood started, did he react. And that was to buffet her brutally upon the side of the head with his open hand, so that stars flashed before her eyes and her head rolled on her shoulders.

Her shirt had been torn open in the struggle, and with cynical cruelty he rasped his thick beard across her bare breasts, bringing the blood to suffuse the fair skin, and fetching a cry of pain and outraged fury from her. Her convulsive resistance was useless; she was crushed down on a couch, disarmed and panting, her eyes blazing up at him like the eyes of a trapped tigress.

A moment later he was hurrying from the chamber, carrying her in his arms. She made no resistance, but the smoldering of her eyes showed that she was unconquered in spirit, at least. She had not cried out. She knew that Conan was not within call, and it did not occur to her that any in Tecuhltli would oppose their prince. But she noticed that Olmec went stealthily, with his head on one side as if listening for sounds of pursuit, and he did not return to the throne-chamber. He carried her through a door that stood opposite that through which he had entered, crossed another room and began stealing down a hall. As she became convinced that he feared some opposition to the abduction, she threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lusty voice.

She was rewarded by a slap that half stunned her, and Olmec quickened his pace to a shambling run.

But her cry had been echoed, and twisting her head about, Valeria, through the tears and stars that partly blinded her, saw Techotl limping after them.

Olmec turned with a snarl, shifting the woman to an uncomfortable and certainly undignified position under one huge

arm, where he held her writhing and kicking vainly, like a child.

"Olmec!" protested Techotl. "You cannot be such a dog as to do this thing! She is Conan's woman! She helped us slay the Xotalancas, and –"

Without a word Olmec balled his free hand into a huge fist and stretched the wounded warrior senseless at his feet. Stooping, and hindered not at all by the struggles and imprecations of his captive, he drew Techotl's sword from its sheath and stabbed the warrior in the breast. Then casting aside the weapon he fled on along the corridor. He did not see a woman's dark face peer cautiously after him from behind a hanging. It vanished, and presently Techotl groaned and stirred, rose dazedly and staggered drunkenly away, calling Conan's name.

Olmec hurried on down the corridor, and descended a winding ivory staircase. He crossed several corridors and halted at last in a broad chamber whose doors were veiled with heavy tapestries, with one exception – a heavy bronze door similar to the Door of the Eagle on the upper floor.

He was moved to rumble, pointing to it: "That is one of the outer doors of Tecuhltli. For the first time in fifty years it is unguarded. We need not guard it now, for Xotalanc is no more."

"Thanks to Conan and me, you bloody rogue!" sneered Valeria, trembling with fury and the shame of physical coercion. "You treacherous dog! Conan will cut your throat for this!"

Olmec did not bother to voice his belief that Conan's own gullet had already been severed according to his whispered command. He was too utterly cynical to be at all interested in her thoughts or opinions. His flame-lit eyes devoured her, dwelling burningly on the generous expanses of clear white flesh exposed where her shirt and breeches had been torn in the struggle.

"Forget Conan," he said thickly. "Olmec is lord of Xuchotl. Xotalanc is no more. There will be no more fighting. We shall spend our lives in drinking and love-making. First let us drink!"

He seated himself on an ivory table and pulled her down on his knees, like a dark-skinned satyr with a white nymph in his arms. Ignoring her un-nymphlike profanity, he held her helpless with one great arm about her waist while the other reached across the table and secured a vessel of wine.

“Drink!” he commanded, forcing it to her lips, as she writhed her head away.

The liquor slopped over, stinging her lips, splashing down on her naked breasts.

“Your guest does not like your wine, Olmec,” spoke a cool, sardonic voice.

Olmec stiffened; fear grew in his flaming eyes. Slowly he swung his great head about and stared at Tascela who posed negligently in the curtained doorway, one hand on her smooth hip. Valeria twisted herself about in his iron grip, and when she met the burning eyes of Tascela, a chill tingled along her supple spine. New experiences were flooding Valeria’s proud soul that night. Recently she had learned to fear a man; now she knew what it was to fear a woman.

Olmec sat motionless, a gray pallor growing under his swarthy skin. Tascela brought her other hand from behind her and displayed a small gold vessel.

“I feared she would not like your wine, Olmec,” purred the princess, “so I brought some of mine, some I brought with me long ago from the shores of Lake Zuad – do you understand, Olmec?”

Beads of sweat stood out suddenly on Olmec’s brow. His muscles relaxed, and Valeria broke away and put the table between them. But though reason told her to dart from the room, some fascination she could not understand held her rigid, watching the scene.

Tascela came toward the seated prince with a swaying, undulating walk that was mockery in itself. Her voice was soft, slurringly caressing, but her eyes gleamed. Her slim fingers stroked his beard lightly.

“You are selfish, Olmec,” she crooned, smiling. “You would keep our handsome guest to yourself, though you knew I wished to entertain her. You are much at fault, Olmec!”

The mask dropped for an instant; her eyes flashed, her face was contorted and with an appalling show of strength her hand locked convulsively in his beard and tore out a great handful. This evidence of unnatural strength was no more terrifying than the momentary baring of the hellish fury that raged under her bland exterior.

Olmec lurched up with a roar, and stood swaying like a bear, his mighty hands clenching and unclenching.

"Slut!" His booming voice filled the room. "Witch! She-devil! Tecuhltli should have slain you fifty years ago! Begone! I have endured too much from you! This white-skinned wench is mine! Get hence before I slay you!"

The princess laughed and dashed the blood-stained strands into his face. Her laughter was less merciful than the ring of flint on steel.

"Once you spoke otherwise, Olmec," she taunted. "Once, in your youth, you spoke words of love. Aye, you were my lover once, years ago, and because you loved me, you slept in my arms beneath the enchanted lotus – and thereby put into my hands the chains that enslaved you. You know you cannot withstand me. You know I have but to gaze into your eyes, with the mystic power a priest of Stygia taught me, long ago, and you are powerless. You remember the night beneath the black lotus that waved above us, stirred by no worldly breeze; you scent again the unearthly perfumes that stole and rose like a cloud about you to enslave you. You cannot fight against me. You are my slave as you were that night – as you shall be so long as you shall live, Olmec of Xuchotl!"

Her voice had sunk to a murmur like the rippling of a stream running through starlit darkness. She leaned close to the prince and spread her long tapering fingers upon his giant breast. His eyes glazed, his great hands fell limply to his sides.

With a smile of cruel malice, Tascela lifted the vessel and placed it to his lips.

"Drink!"

Mechanically the prince obeyed. And instantly the glaze passed from his eyes and they were flooded with fury, comprehension and an awful fear. His mouth gaped, but no sound issued. For an instant he reeled on buckling knees, and then fell in a sodden heap on the floor.

His fall jolted Valeria out of her paralysis. She turned and sprang toward the door, but with a movement that would have shamed a leaping panther, Tascela was before her. Valeria struck at her with her clenched fist, and all the power of her supple body behind the blow. It would have stretched a man senseless on the floor. But with a lithe twist of her torso, Tascela avoided the blow and caught the pirate's wrist. The next instant Valeria's left hand was imprisoned, and holding her wrists together with one hand, Tascela calmly bound them with a cord she drew from her girdle. Valeria thought she had tasted the ultimate in humiliation already that night, but her shame at being manhandled by Olmec was nothing to the sensations that now shook her supple frame. Valeria had always been inclined to despise the other members of her sex; and it was overwhelming to encounter another woman who could handle her like a child. She scarcely resisted at all when Tascela forced her into a chair and drawing her bound wrists down between her knees, fastened them to the chair.

Casually stepping over Olmec, Tascela walked to the bronze door and shot the bolt and threw it open, revealing a hallway without.

"Opening upon this hall," she remarked, speaking to her feminine captive for the first time, "there is a chamber which in old times was used as a torture room. When we retired into Tecuhltli, we brought most of the apparatus with us, but there was one piece too heavy to move. It is still in working order. I think it will be quite convenient now."

An understanding flame of terror rose in Olmec's eyes. Tascela strode back to him, bent and gripped him by the hair.

"He is only paralyzed temporarily," she remarked conversationally. "He can hear, think, and feel – aye, he can feel very well indeed!"

With which sinister observation she started toward the door, dragging the giant bulk with an ease that made the pirate's eyes dilate. She passed into the hall and moved down it without hesitation, presently disappearing with her captive into a chamber that opened into it, and whence shortly thereafter issued the clank of iron.

Valeria swore softly and tugged vainly, with her legs braced against the chair. The cords that confined her were apparently unbreakable.

Tascela presently returned alone; behind her a muffled groaning issued from the chamber. She closed the door but did not bolt it. Tascela was beyond the grip of habit, as she was beyond the touch of other human instincts and emotions.

Valeria sat dumbly, watching the woman in whose slim hands, the pirate realized, her destiny now rested.

Tascela grasped her yellow locks and forced back her head, looking impersonally down into her face. But the glitter in her dark eyes was not impersonal.

"I have chosen you for a great honor," she said. "You shall restore the youth of Tascela. Oh, you stare at that! My appearance is that of youth, but through my veins creeps the sluggish chill of approaching age, as I have felt it a thousand times before. I am old, so old I do not remember my childhood. But I was a girl once, and a priest of Stygia loved me, and gave me the secret of immortality and youth everlasting. He died, then – some said by poison. But I dwelt in my palace by the shores of Lake Zuad and the passing years touched me not. So at last a king of Stygia desired me, and my people rebelled and brought me to this land. Olmec called me a princess. I am not of royal blood. I am greater than a princess. I am Tascela, whose youth your own glorious youth shall restore."

Valeria's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She sensed here a mystery darker than the degeneracy she had anticipated.

The taller woman unbound the Aquilonian's wrists and pulled her to her feet. It was not fear of the dominant strength that lurked in the princess' limbs that made Valeria a helpless, quivering captive in her hands. It was the burning, hypnotic, terrible eyes of Tascela.

VII
He Comes from the Dark

"Well, I'm a Kushite!"

Conan glared down at the man on the iron rack.

"What the devil are *you* doing on that thing?"

Incoherent sounds issued from behind the gag and Conan bent and tore it away, evoking a bellow of fear from the captive; for his action caused the iron ball to lurch down until it nearly touched the broad breast.

"Be careful, for Set's sake!" begged Olmec.

"What for?" demanded Conan. "Do you think I care what happens to you? I only wish I had time to stay here and watch that chunk of iron grind your guts out. But I'm in a hurry. Where's Valeria?"

"Loose me!" urged Olmec. "I will tell you all!"

"Tell me first."

"Never!" The prince's heavy jaws set stubbornly.

"All right." Conan seated himself on a near-by bench. "I'll find her myself, after you've been reduced to a jelly. I believe I can speed up that process by twisting my sword-point around in your ear," he added, extending the weapon experimentally.

"Wait!" Words came in a rush from the captive's ashy lips. "Tascela took her from me. I've never been anything but a puppet in Tascela's hands."

"Tascela?" snorted Conan, and spat. "Why, the filthy –"

"No, no!" panted Olmec. "It's worse than you think. Tascela is old – centuries old. She renews her life and her youth by the sacrifice of beautiful young women. That's one thing that has reduced the clan to its present state. She will draw the essence of Valeria's life into her own body, and bloom with fresh vigor and beauty."

"Are the doors locked?" asked Conan, thumbing his sword edge.

"Aye! But I know a way to get into Tecuhltli. Only Tascela and I know, and she thinks me helpless and you slain. Free me and I swear I will help you rescue Valeria. Without my help you cannot win into Tecuhltli; for even if you tortured me into revealing the secret, you couldn't work it. Let me go, and we will steal on Tascela

and kill her before she can work magic – before she can fix her eyes on us. A knife thrown from behind will do the work. I should have killed her thus long ago, but I feared that without her to aid us the Xotalancas would overcome us. She needed my help, too; that's the only reason she let me live this long. Now neither needs the other, and one must die. I swear that when we have slain the witch, you and Valeria shall go free without harm. My people will obey me when Tascela is dead."

Conan stooped and cut the ropes that held the prince, and Olmec slid cautiously from under the great ball and rose, shaking his head like a bull and muttering imprecations as he fingered his lacerated scalp. Standing shoulder to shoulder the two men presented a formidable picture of primitive power. Olmec was as tall as Conan, and heavier; but there was something repellent about the Tlazitlan, something abysmal and monstrous that contrasted unfavorably with the clean-cut, compact hardness of the Cimmerian. Conan had discarded the remnants of his tattered, blood-soaked shirt, and stood with his remarkable muscular development impressively revealed. His great shoulders were as broad as those of Olmec, and more cleanly outlined, and his huge breast arched with a more impressive sweep to a hard waist that lacked the paunchy thickness of Olmec's midsection. He might have been an image of primal strength cut out of bronze. Olmec was darker, but not from the burning of the sun. If Conan was a figure out of the dawn of Time, Olmec was a shambling, somber shape from the darkness of Time's pre-dawn.

"Lead on," demanded Conan. "And keep ahead of me. I don't trust you any farther than I can throw a bull by the tail."

Olmec turned and stalked on ahead of him, one hand twitching slightly as it plucked at his matted beard.

Olmec did not lead Conan back to the bronze door, which the prince naturally supposed Tascela had locked, but to a certain chamber on the border of Tecuhltli.

"This secret has been guarded for half a century," he said. "Not even our own clan knew of it, and the Xotalancas never learned.

Tecuhltli himself built this secret entrance, afterward slaying the slaves who did the work; for he feared that he might find himself locked out of his own kingdom some day because of the spite of Tascela, whose passion for him soon changed to hate. But she discovered the secret, and barred the hidden door against him one day as he fled back from an unsuccessful raid, and the Xotalancas took him and flayed him. But once, spying upon her, I saw her enter Tecuhltli by this route, and so learned the secret."

He pressed upon a gold ornament in the wall, and a panel swung inward, disclosing an ivory stair leading upward.

"This stair is built within the wall," said Olmec. "It leads up to a tower upon the roof, and thence other stairs wind down to the various chambers. Hasten!"

"After you, comrade!" retorted Conan satirically, swaying his broadsword as he spoke, and Olmec shrugged his shoulders and stepped onto the staircase. Conan instantly followed him, and the door shut behind them. Far above a cluster of fire-jewels made the staircase a well of dusky dragon-light.

They mounted until Conan estimated that they were above the level of the fourth floor, and then came out into a cylindrical tower, in the domed roof of which was set the bunch of fire-jewels that lighted the stair. Through gold-barred windows, set with unbreakable crystal panes, the first windows he had seen in Xuchotl, Conan got a glimpse of high ridges, domes and more towers, looming darkly against the stars. He was looking across the roofs of Xuchotl.

Olmec did not look through the windows. He hurried down one of the several stairs that wound down from the tower, and when they had descended a few feet, this stair changed into a narrow corridor that wound tortuously on for some distance. It ceased at a steep flight of steps leading downward. There Olmec paused.

Up from below, muffled, but unmistakable, welled a woman's scream, edged with fright, fury and shame. And Conan recognized Valeria's voice.

In the swift rage roused by that cry, and the amazement of wondering what peril could wring such a shriek from Valeria's

reckless lips, Conan forgot Olmec. He pushed past the prince and started down the stair. Awakening instinct brought him about again, just as Olmec struck with his great malletlike fist. The blow, fierce and silent, was aimed at the base of Conan's brain. But the Cimmerian wheeled in time to receive the buffet on the side of his neck instead. The impact would have snapped the vertebræ of a lesser man. As it was, Conan swayed backward, but even as he reeled he dropped his sword, useless at such close quarters, and grasped Olmec's extended arm, dragging the prince with him as he fell. Headlong they went down the steps together, in a revolving whirl of limbs and heads and bodies. And as they went Conan's iron fingers found and locked in Olmec's bull-throat.

The barbarian's neck and shoulder felt numb from the sledge-like impact of Olmec's huge fist, which had carried all the strength of the massive forearm, thick triceps and great shoulder. But this did not affect his ferocity to any appreciable extent. Like a bulldog he hung on grimly, shaken and battered and beaten against the steps as they rolled, until at last they struck an ivory panel-door at the bottom with such an impact that they splintered it its full length and crashed through its ruins. But Olmec was already dead, for those iron fingers had crushed out his life and broken his neck as they fell.

Conan rose, shaking the splinters from his great shoulder, blinking blood and dust out of his eyes.

He was in the great throneroom. There were fifteen people in that room besides himself. The first person he saw was Valeria. A curious black altar stood before the throne-dais. Ranged about it, seven black candles in golden candle-sticks sent up oozing spirals of thick green smoke, disturbingly scented. These spirals united in a cloud near the ceiling, forming a smoky arch above the altar. On that altar lay Valeria, stark naked, her white flesh gleaming in shocking contrast to the glistening ebon stone. She was not bound. She lay at full length, her arms stretched out above her head to their fullest extent. At the head of the altar knelt a young man, holding her

wrists firmly. A young woman knelt at the other end of the altar, grasping her ankles. Between them she could neither rise nor move.

Eleven men and women of Tecuhltli knelt dumbly in a semicircle, watching the scene with hot, lustful eyes.

On the ivory throne-seat Tascela lolled. Bronze bowls of incense rolled their spirals about her; the wisps of smoke curled about her naked limbs like caressing fingers. She could not sit still; she squirmed and shifted about with sensuous abandon, as if finding pleasure in the contact of the smooth ivory with her sleek flesh.

The crash of the door as it broke beneath the impact of the hurtling bodies caused no change in the scene. The kneeling men and women merely glanced incuriously at the corpse of their prince and at the man who rose from the ruins of the door, then swung their eyes greedily back to the writhing white shape on the black altar. Tascela looked insolently at him, and sprawled back on her seat, laughing mockingly.

“Slut!” Conan saw red. His hands clenched into iron hammers as he started for her. With his first step something clanged loudly and steel bit savagely into his leg. He stumbled and almost fell, checked in his headlong stride. The jaws of an iron trap had closed on his leg, with teeth that sank deep and held. Only the ridged muscles of his calf saved the bone from being splintered. The accursed thing had sprung out of the smoldering floor without warning. He saw the slots now, in the floor where the jaws had lain, perfectly camouflaged.

“Fool!” laughed Tascela. “Did you think I would not guard against your possible return? Every door in this chamber is guarded by such traps. Stand there and watch now, while I fulfill the destiny of your handsome friend! Then I will decide your own.”

Conan’s hand instinctively sought his belt, only to encounter an empty scabbard. His sword was on the stair behind him. His poniard was lying back in the forest, where the dragon had torn it from his jaw. The steel teeth in his leg were like burning coals, but the pain was not as savage as the fury that seethed in his soul. He was trapped, like a wolf. If he had had his sword he would have hewn off his leg and crawled across the floor to slay Tascela. Valeria’s eyes

rolled toward him with mute appeal, and his own helplessness sent red waves of madness surging through his brain.

Dropping on the knee of his free leg, he strove to get his fingers between the jaws of the trap, to tear them apart by sheer strength. Blood started from beneath his finger nails, but the jaws fitted close about his leg in a circle whose segments jointed perfectly, contracted until there was no space between his mangled flesh and the fanged iron. The sight of Valeria's naked body added flame to the fire of his rage.

Tascela ignored him. Rising languidly from her seat she swept the ranks of her subjects with a searching glance, and asked: "Where are Xamec, Zlanath and Tachic?"

"They did not return from the catacombs, princess," answered a man. "Like the rest of us, they bore the bodies of the slain into the crypts, but they have not returned. Perhaps the ghost of Tolkemec took them."

"Be silent, fool!" she ordered harshly. "The ghost is a myth."

She came down from her dais, playing with a thin gold-hilted dagger. Her eyes burned like nothing on the hither side of hell. She paused beside the altar and spoke in the tense stillness.

“Your life shall make me young, white woman!” she said. “I shall lean upon your bosom and place my lips over yours, and slowly – ah, slowly! – sink this blade through your heart, so that your life,

fleeing your stiffening body, shall enter mine, making me bloom again with youth and with life everlasting!”

Slowly, like a serpent arching toward its victim, she bent down through the writhing smoke, closer and closer over the now motionless woman who stared up into her glowing dark eyes – eyes that grew larger and deeper, blazing like black moons in the swirling smoke. The kneeling people gripped their hands and held their breath, tense for the bloody climax, and the only sound was Conan’s fierce panting as he strove to tear his leg from the trap.

All eyes were glued on the altar and the white figure there; the crash of a thunderbolt could hardly have broken the spell, yet it was only a low cry that shattered the fixity of the scene and brought all whirling about – a low cry, yet one to make the hair stand up stiffly on the scalp. They looked, and they saw.

Framed in the door to the left of the dais stood a nightmare figure. It was a man, with a tangle of white hair and a matted white beard that fell over his breast. Rags only partly covered his gaunt frame, revealing half-naked limbs strangely unnatural in appearance. The skin was not like that of a normal human. There was a suggestion of *scaliness* about it, as if the owner had dwelt long under conditions almost antithetical to those conditions under which human life ordinarily thrives. And there was nothing at all human about the eyes that blazed from the tangle of white hair. They were great gleaming disks that stared unwinkingly, luminous, whitish, and without a hint of normal emotion or sanity. The mouth gaped, but no coherent words issued – only a high-pitched tittering.

“Tolkemec!” whispered Tascela, livid, while the others crouched in speechless horror. “No myth, then, no ghost! Set! You have dwelt for twelve years in darkness! Twelve years among the bones of the dead! What grisly food did you find? What mad travesty of life did you live, in the stark blackness of that eternal night? I see now why Xamec and Zlanath and Tachic did not return from the catacombs – and never will return. But why have you waited so long to strike?

Were you seeking something, in the pits? Some secret weapon you knew was hidden there? And have you found it at last?"

That hideous tittering was Tolkemec's only reply, as he bounded into the room with a long leap that carried him over the secret trap before the door – by chance, or by some faint recollection of the ways of Xuchotl. He was not mad, as a man is mad. He had dwelt apart from humanity so long that he was no longer human. Only an unbroken thread of memory embodied in hate and the urge for vengeance had connected him with the humanity from which he had been cut off, and held him lurking near the people he hated. Only that thin string had kept him from racing and prancing off for ever into the black corridors and realms of the subterranean world he had discovered, long ago.

"You sought something hidden!" whispered Tascela, cringing back. "And you have found it! You remember the feud! After all these years of blackness, you remember!"

For in the lean hand of Tolkemec now waved a curious jade-hued wand, on the end of which glowed a knob of crimson shaped like a pomegranate. She sprang aside as he thrust it out like a spear, and a beam of crimson fire lanced from the pomegranate. It missed Tascela, but the woman holding Valeria's ankles was in the way. It smote between her shoulders. There was a sharp crackling sound and the ray of fire flashed from her bosom and struck the black altar, with a snapping of blue sparks. The woman toppled sidewise, shriveling and withering like a mummy even as she fell.

Valeria rolled from the altar on the other side, and started for the opposite wall on all fours. For hell had burst loose in the throneroom of dead Olmec.

The man who had held Valeria's hands was the next to die. He turned to run, but before he had taken half a dozen steps, Tolkemec, with an agility appalling in such a frame, bounded around to a position that placed the man between him and the altar. Again the red fire-beam flashed and the Tecuhltli rolled lifeless to the floor, as the beam completed its course with a burst of blue sparks against the altar.

Then began slaughter. Screaming insanely the people rushed about the chamber, caroming from one another, stumbling and falling. And among them Tolkemec capered and pranced, dealing death. They could not escape by the doors; for apparently the metal of the portals served like the metal-veined stone altar to complete the circuit for whatever hellish power flashed like thunderbolts from the witch-wand the ancient waved in his hand. When he caught a man or a woman between him and a door or the altar, that one died instantly. He chose no special victim. He took them as they came, with his rags flapping about his wildly gyrating limbs, and the gusty echoes of his tittering sweeping the room above the screams. And bodies fell like falling leaves about the altar and at the doors. One warrior in desperation rushed at him, lifting a dagger, only to fall before he could strike. But the rest were like crazed cattle, with no thought for resistance, and no chance of escape.

The last Tecuhltli except Tascela had fallen when the princess reached the Cimmerian and the girl who had taken refuge beside him. Tascela bent and touched the floor, pressing a design upon it. Instantly the iron jaws released the bleeding limb and sank back into the floor.

“Slay him if you can!” she panted, and pressed a heavy knife into his hand. “I have no magic to withstand him!”

With a grunt he sprang before the women, not heeding his lacerated leg in the heat of the fighting-lust. Tolkemec was coming toward him, his weird eyes ablaze, but he hesitated at the gleam of the knife in Conan’s hand. Then began a grim game, as Tolkemec sought to circle about Conan and get the barbarian between him and the altar or a metal door, while Conan sought to avoid this and drive home his knife. The women watched tensely, holding their breath.

There was no sound except the rustle and scrape of quick-shifting feet. Tolkemec pranced and capered no more. He realized that grimmer game confronted him than the people who had died screaming and fleeing. In the elemental blaze of the barbarian’s eyes he read an intent deadly as his own. Back and forth they weaved, and when one moved the other moved as if invisible threads bound

them together. But all the time Conan was getting closer and closer to his enemy. Already the coiled muscles of his thighs were beginning to flex for a spring, when Valeria cried out. For a fleeting instant a bronze door was in line with Conan's moving body. The red line leaped, searing Conan's flank as he twisted aside, and even as he shifted he hurled the knife. Old Tolkemec went down, truly slain at last, the hilt vibrating on his breast.

Tascela sprang – not toward Conan, but toward the wand where it shimmered like a live thing on the floor. But as she leaped, so did Valeria, with a dagger snatched from a dead man, and the blade, driven with all the power of the pirate's muscles, impaled the princess of Tecuhltli so that the point stood out between her breasts. Tascela screamed once and fell dead, and Valeria spurned the body with her heel as it fell.

"I had to do that much, for my own self-respect!" panted Valeria, facing Conan across the limp corpse.

"Well, this cleans up the feud," he grunted. "It's been a hell of a night! Where did these people keep their food? I'm hungry."

"You need a bandage on that leg." Valeria ripped a length of silk from a hanging and knotted it about her waist, then tore off some smaller strips which she bound efficiently about the barbarian's lacerated limb.

"I can walk on it," he assured her. "Let's begone. It's dawn, outside this infernal city. I've had enough of Xuchotl. It's well the breed exterminated itself. I don't want any of their accursed jewels. They might be haunted."

"There is enough clean loot in the world for you and me," she said, straightening to stand tall and splendid before him.

The old blaze came back in his eyes, and this time she did not resist as he caught her fiercely in his arms.

"It's a long way to the coast," she said presently, withdrawing her lips from his.

"What matter?" he laughed. "There's nothing we can't conquer. We'll have our feet on a ship's deck before the Stygians open their

ports for the trading season. And then we'll show the world what plundering means!"

OceanofPDF.com

Cimmeria

Written in Mission, Texas, February, 1932; suggested by the memory of the hill-country above Fredericksburg seen in a mist of winter rain.

– Robert E. Howard

I remember
The dark woods, masking slopes of sombre hills;
The grey clouds' leaden everlasting arch;
The dusky streams that flowed without a sound,
And the lone winds that whispered down the passes.

Vista on vista marching, hills on hills,
Slope beyond slope, each dark with sullen trees,
Our gaunt land lay. So when a man climbed up
A rugged peak and gazed, his shaded eye
Saw but the endless vista – hill on hill,
Slope beyond slope, each hooded like its brothers.

It was a gloomy land that seemed to hold
All winds and clouds and dreams that shun the sun,
With bare boughs rattling in the lonesome winds,
And the dark woodlands brooding over all,
Not even lightened by the rare dim sun
Which made squat shadows out of men; they called it
Cimmeria, land of Darkness and deep Night.

It was so long ago and far away
I have forgot the very name men called me.
The axe and flint-tipped spear are like a dream,
And hunts and wars are shadows. I recall
Only the stillness of that sombre land;
The clouds that piled forever on the hills,
The dimness of the everlasting woods.
Cimmeria, land of Darkness and the Night.

Oh, soul of mine, born out of shadowed hills,

To clouds and winds and ghosts that shun the sun,
How many deaths shall serve to break at last
This heritage which wraps me in the grey
Apparel of ghosts? I search my heart and find
Cimmeria, land of Darkness and the Night.

OceanofPDF.com

Appendices

Barbarian at the Pantheon-gates

by Steven Tompkins

In [Frederick Jackson] Turner's intellectual scenario, the frontier was visualized as a terrain on which two kingdoms of force, "savagery and civilization," stood toe to toe contending for supremacy. As long as neither held dominance there was danger, but there was also boundless freedom. Into this landscape came the archetypal American, an American who was free in a way that no American has been free since. Free to choose patterns of conduct from an infinity of choices, free to move easily back and forth across the line which separated savagery and civilization, free to take the best from the wilderness and the best that civilization had to offer, free to create his self from the materials of a totally unrestricted environment.

– *Tom Pilkington,* State of Mind: Texas Literature and Culture

That knocking you hear, polite but persistent, is the people who assembled Volumes I and II of *The Best of Robert E. Howard*, addressing themselves to the front door of the American literary pantheon. Let's be upfront while we're out front: not only do we put Howard's finest work on a pedestal, we've even gone so far as to pick out a place of honor for that pedestal within the pantheon's marmoreal recesses. These books are designed to be more than just a Petition for Admittance; our aim has been a show of force, an effort to rout derisive interdiction with a decisive intervention in a debate that's been too non-evidentiary for too long.

In a sense that debate has been underway since at least the fall of 1934, while Howard was still writing – let's join a conversation already in progress back then between two cousins, both small-town schoolteachers in West Texas, as they discuss a writer dismissed by one as small-time. Enid Gwathmey refuses to accept "the pulp and confession magazines as legitimate starting places for writers. Good stories had stood the test of time. Examples of good writing were put into literature books." That's all Novalyne Price, to whose

invaluable 1986 memoir *One Who Walked Alone* we owe the recap of this cousinly disagreement, needs in order to pounce:

> "You read Edgar Allan Poe, don't you? I heard you talking about him to your class the other day."
>
> She looked at me as if I had the measles. "Poe is a good writer," she said. "I was pointing out what a wonderful choice of words he had; I was trying to get my students to enjoy using words carefully to improve their writing."
>
> "Bob has a wonderful choice of words, too," I insisted, "and as far as the content of his stories and of Poe's, they write the same kind of nightmarish stuff. The main difference is that Poe's works are in the literature books and Bob's aren't … yet. Someday, some English teacher will be telling kids to try and write like Bob."
>
> "I will have to see that to believe it," Enid said. "I will certainly have to see that to believe it."

The Best of Robert E. Howard would enable Enid to see and believe, but handing the two volumes to her would require some time travel. More encouragingly, the readers of today and tomorrow now have the opportunity to verify the "wonderful choice of words" defended by Novalyne Price for themselves in the preceding pages. Those words do indeed deserve to be "in the literature books," and are closer to getting there thanks to Del Rey's Library of Robert E. Howard. And while only a few English teachers are telling their pupils to "try and write like Bob" as of yet, he is beginning to be thesis-fodder or a dissertation-magnet, a trend that the overdue-but-impending arrival of his Collected Letters and Complete Poems can only galvanize.

Novalyne's attribution of "the same kind of nightmarish stuff" to both Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Ervin Howard is a reminder that the Texan is already a redoubtable presence in one pantheon. We can't be certain that she took her cue from her sometime boyfriend in measuring him against Poe, but we do know that years before Howard met her, in a December 1928 letter he alluded with a sort of self-deprecating bravado to "the school to which Poe contributed and I at present honor with my presence – literarily speaking – I mean the school of fantasy and horror writing." That he was at the

top of his class within that school has been confirmed by generations of fans and a generous entry in the 1997 *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, in which John Clute deems him "of central interest in the field of fantasy" and attributes his "huge appeal to later readers" to "considerable invention" and "the feel of the wind of Story."

Heroic/epic fantasy authors and historical novelists specializing in the edged-weapon clashes of ancient or medieval warfare are often quick to tip their plumed, crested, or horned helmets to Howard. As David Weber recognized in an introduction to a 1995 collection of the Bran Mak Morn stories, "Bran and Cormac and Kull are always ready to teach yet another generation of writers how to tell the high, old tales of doom and glory."

Howard was more than just a fantasist, although there is no "just" about his achievements in the genre. While it would be silly to label him, or anyone, an American Tolkien, it is not at all silly to alter a few pronouns in one of leading Tolkienist Verlyn Flieger's observations about the Englishman in order to render her insight applicable to both men: "By looking backward [their] fantasy reflected the present, the temporal dislocation of [their] escape mirrored the psychological disjunction and displacement of [their century]." Flieger goes on to emphasize that "the very act of escape acknowledges that which it flees, and nostalgia, like modernism, must have a ground from which to turn away." In Howard's case that ground was American, and therefore controlled by a dominant down-to-earth outlook given to shooting down flights of fancy; the national lore of settlers and strivers usually chased anything more outrageous and fact-flouting out of town.

Brian Attebery's *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* – essential reading, provided one avoids falling into the book's Howard-shaped hole – begins with an examination of how fantasy was endangered before the genre could even acquire a tradition in "the country where pragmatism became a philosophy and 'normalcy' a point of faith." Nor should we forget the *ur*-faith of Puritanism, which ensures that even today places exist in the United States where a burning eagerness to read, say, the Harry Potter novels is met with an eagerness to burn the Harry Potter novels. The

Enlightenment so thoroughly incorporated in the Founders' blueprints was hardly more encouraging; how, for example, is a model home like Monticello to be haunted? The fantastic survived, in Attebery's words, "as a resistance movement, working to undermine the national faith in things-as-they-are," one given to "hiding out in the nursery and periodically venturing out disguised as romance or satire or science fiction."

L. Frank Baum paved the yellow brick road for the fantasists that followed, but his Oz is arguably more of a proto-Disneyland than a fully functioning American fairyland, as disinviting to many adults, and adolescents aspiring to adulthood, as it is come-hitherish to children and those other adults who aspire to revisit childhood. Edgar Rice Burroughs afforded Howard his principal model of a dream-life gaudier and boasting the performances of more exotic megafauna than any three-ring circus, but told his most enduring stories on the far, the *optimistic* side of the First World War, before shell-shock and trench fever went to work on Victorian values. To us Barsoom and Amtor and Pellucidar seem to yield too quickly to empire-building and futures of cultural terraforming rather than terror swarming. Howard's dark fantasy is more informed by history, as is his history by dark fantasy – witness the Suleyman-who-is-no-longer-quite-so-Magnificent of *The Shadow of the Vulture*, for whom imminent defeat appears as "a gray plain of the dead, where corpses dragged their lifeless bodies to an outworn task, animated only by the will of their master."

But Howard's well-situated alcove in the fantasy pantheon isn't enough for us; by hook or by crook, or rather by battering ram or skeleton key, we're looking to get him into another pantheon as well, the one implicit in the argument Novalyne Price had with her cousin Enid: "Poe's works are in the literature books and Bob's aren't … yet." To highlight what makes Howard an American classic, we must agree on what makes a classic. Although science fiction writer Gordon R. Dickson, in his introduction to the 1980 Howard collection *The Road of Azrael*, defined a genuine classic as the "golden bell-sound" of a unique voice, that of an author "who has something to give which did not exist in the world before he

came into it, and which disappeared forever when he went out of it," we need credentials to sway those who feign deafness to, or genuinely cannot hear, the golden bell-sound.

Howard's own words to his friend Tevis Clyde Smith after he received the first of many missives from fellow *Weird Tales* contributor H. P. Lovecraft could be construed as a warning: "He's out of my class. I'm game to go the limit with a man my weight, but me scrapping with him is like a palooka climbing into a ring with a champion." He was *wrong as can be* about that – geography forced his sparring-partnership with Lovecraft (unlike, say, the bond between Tolkien and C. S. Lewis) to play itself out on paper, and most semi-impartial judges have awarded a majority of the rounds to Howard – but a few too many ill-considered comparisons and we might as well present his literary standing with a one-way ticket to Palookaville. Are we shoving him into the ring against opponents to whom he would be lucky to lose? Do even his most unforgettable stories belong in the same weight class as those of Poe and Hawthorne, Twain and Bierce, Hemingway and Faulkner? Are we being delusional if we borrow what D. H. Lawrence said of Herman Melville – "He was neither mad nor crazy. But he was over the border. He was half a water animal, like those terrible yellow-bearded Vikings who broke out of the waves in beaked ships. He was mad to look over our horizons. Anywhere, anywhere out of our world. To get away, out!" – and apply it to Howard? Well, as Sailor Steve Costigan says of himself and Mike, his throat-seeking missile of a bulldog, in this volume's *The Bulldog Breed*, "Always outclassed in everything except guts and grip!"

The American literary pantheon is not on any map ("True places never are," Melville reminds us in *Moby Dick)* but just as baseball boasts Cooperstown and rock-and-roll its Hall of Fame in Cleveland, The Library of America is an approximation, a simulacrum, the earthly tabernacle or reliquary for "America's best and most significant writing." Like America itself, an American pantheon should be a work in progress, a movable – and expandable – feast. Room is being found for those who never asked to be Americans, or did indeed ask but were rejected, and if the Library of America's

seal of approval can be read as the functional equivalent of a pantheon induction, the hospitable welcomes recently extended to H. P. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick should be cause for Howardist rejoicing. The Library's blurbage for Lovecraft salutes his "classic stories of the strange and fantastic from the visionary master of cosmic horror" and "intensely personal vision." The vision of his Texas correspondent was equally intense and personal; the word "impersonal" might as well be Etruscan in terms of its usefulness when examining Howard's work.

Far from being teacher's pets, idealizations with ichor or ink in their veins instead of blood, the residents of the American pantheon fascinate as human beings, deeply flawed but even more deeply talented. Our inductee-in-waiting will fit right in; he is always going to be a controversial figure, one with not only his fair share of faults, but also an unfair share of alleged faults. Lovecraft somehow neglected to accuse him of complicity in the Lindbergh kidnapping, but sent so many other reproaches his way that Howard allowed himself a little fun in a July 1935 letter:

> Recalling off-hand the charges you have made against me, I remember that at various times you have accused me of being: Exalter-of-the-Physical-Above-the-Mental; Enemy of Humanity; Foe of Mankind; Apostle of Prejudice; Distorter of Fact; Repudiater of Evolutionary Standards; Over-Emphasizer of Ethics; Sympathizer of Criminals (that one broke all altitude records); Egotist; Poseur; Emotionalist; Defender of Ignorance; Sentimentalist; Romanticist. If I were guilty of all the things of which you've accused me, I not only wouldn't be fit to live; I wouldn't have sense enough to live.

To which list of charges some pantheon-gatekeepers would hasten to add, Pulp Hack, Racist, Sexist, Suicide, Bully, Arrested Adolescent, and Creator of Conan. Yes, Conan, the Cimmerian, he of the gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, he who poses a gigantic problem in that his huge, but decidedly non-Schwarzeneggerian, shadow falls across the rest of Howard's work. Stick up for Howard to her cousin Enid though she did, Novalyne Price herself seems to have regarded Conan as a deal-breakingly undesirable potential brother-in-law, a dependably bad influence on the writer she was dating. And down

through the decades since then, the Cimmerian has gone the way of Tarzan and James Bond as a creation whose links to his creator have been repeatedly severed, so that in *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity* we catch the otherwise staggeringly erudite Garry Wills referring to "Conan the Barbarian, created by John Milius."

"Conan the Barbarian," as dumbed-down as he is pumped-up, is merely a multimedia reduction of Conan the Cimmerian, the character displayed to optimum effect in this volume's *The Tower of the Elephant* and *Red Nails,* and in *The People of the Black Circle* and *Beyond the Black River* of its predecessor. The title of the present afterword, which positions *Howard* as a barbarian at the pantheon-gates, is intended as more than a rote invocation of his uncivilized-and-proud-of-it characters. For much of America's cultural history, any homegrown writer who presented himself at the gates guarded by Europeans – and those Americans who, in the words of Ernest Hemingway, "wrote like exiled English colonials from an England of which they were never a part to a newer England that they were making" – was *ipso facto* a barbarian, an outlander.

When we run a banner with the strange device "Barbarian" up the flagpole in an American context to see if anyone salutes, we get some historically and culturally freighted responses. Before Howard happened to "barbarism" and "barbarian," European-Americans usually associated those words with the continent's previous owners. Europeans for their part have reached for the adjective "barbaric" and the noun "barbarian" so often when considering Americans of any sort that it would be forgivable to conclude that the New World was named in honor of the navigator Barbario Vespucci. And Americans have been almost as quick to call each other barbarians; for New Yorker George Templeton Strong, that always-quotable diarist/onlooker of the antebellum and Civil War years, all Southerners bore the mark of Cain as soon as congressman Charles Sumner bore the marks of the hotheaded Preston Brooks' cane, and were besides "a race of lazy, ignorant, coarse, sensual, swaggering, sordid beggarly barbarians."

The childhood adage is only half right: sticks and stones may break our bones, but names can hurt hellaciously as well. However, names are also like sticks and stones in that they can be picked up and thrown back in the face of tormentors. In recent decades epithets meant to identify and isolate the members of certain groups have been worn by those members as badges of affirmation, and before that a few Americans comfortable in their own figurative buckskins taught themselves to take pride in, rather than umbrage at, "barbarian" and its variants. Walt Whitman's *I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world* in *Song of Myself* is only the most famous instance.

American barbarians force their way in where they are least expected. Henry James was a writer so unlike Howard it is a wonder the English language was big enough for the two of them; and yet in his 1877 novel *The American*, protagonist Christopher Newman visits the Louvre, where he is perceived as "the great western barbarian stepping forth in his innocence and might, gazing a while at this poor effete old world, and then swooping down on it." John Dos Passos' explanation for his return to America after the Great War was that "for us barbarians, men from an unfinished ritual," postwar Europe was once again overly "gentle." And barbaric resolve of a sort that Howard might have found admirable is implicit in this Henry Miller exhortation in *Tropic of Cancer:* "It may be that we are doomed, that there is no hope for us, any of us; but if that is so let us set up a last, agonizing, blood-curdling howl, a screech of defiance, a war-whoop!" In his *Seven Keys to Texas* the historian T. R. Fehrenbach even frames the "eternal dilemma" of the Lone Star State writer in nigh-Howardian terms: "To go or not to go to Rome, and when in Rome, to try to become Roman, or make his living explaining his barbarian ways to Romans – who may find them greatly entertaining."[1]

Howard was aware that his barbarians might be mistaken for Noble Savages. Writing to Lovecraft in late October 1932, he denied possessing an "idyllic view of barbarism," and expressed impatience "with the depiction of the barbarian of any race as a stately, god-like child of Nature, endowed with strange wisdom and speaking in

measured and sonorous phrases." He freely admitted that the barbarian of history was subject to tabus like "sharp sword-edges, between which he walked shuddering," and more often than not brutal, squalid, childish, treacherous, and unstable. And yet "The day and night were his book, wherein he read of all things that run or walk or crawl or fly. Trees and grass and moss-covered rocks and birds and beasts and clouds were alive to him, and partook of his kinship. The wind blew his hair and he looked with naked eyes into the sun. Often he starved, but when he feasted, it was with a mighty gusto." The Howard barbarian might leave Eden, an Eden more unforgiving in different ways than the Genesis-garden, but he does so of his own accord, and when he ventures city-ward he functions as an x-factor, a reality principle, handwriting on the wall scrawled forebodingly before ever the wall was built.

We might transfer to Conan what Paul Horgan said of the mountain man in his *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History:* "He was an American original, as hard as the hardest thing that could happen to him," but after that – and this is crucial – much would still need to be said. From the criminality of the City of Thieves' Maul, *The Tower of the Elephant* scales the sheer, silvery cliff-face of cruelty, of a highly civilized barbarity exposure to which will move Conan, the nominal barbarian, to shoulder the guilt of the entire human race. The not-from-around-here thief or assassin, the off-limits temple or tower, the monstrous or demonic hench-being of a blackly renowned necromancer awaiting the intruder – these are the basic building blocks of a fantasy subgenre with which presumed familiarity easily breeds contempt. Yet Howard, decades before sword-and-sorcery was even dubbed sword-and-sorcery, used the blocks to construct something startlingly non-formulaic, so much so that when Tom Shippey, as perceptive an academic as has ever engaged with modern fantasy, picked *Tower* for his 1994 *Oxford Book of Fantasy Stories*, he remarked on the "unexpected" compassion of "Howard's normally brutish hero."[2]

And so we open the pages of one of the pivotal American heroic fantasy tales and find an outlander pitying a being who is infinitely more of an outsider, while the monster-killing imperative yields to

the decision to assist the monster in its revenge-killing. We are told in *The Tower of the Elephant* that Conan recalls Yara to wakefulness "like a judge pronouncing doom," and the barbarian as the feral Rhadamanthus by way of whom his creator pronounces the dooms of civilization's sophistries and shibboleths, the certainty that those who live off the fat of the land will die from that same luxury in the blink of history's eye – these concepts are epitomized and versified in that crucial Howard poem, *A Song of the Naked Lands*.

The Howardisms of this parable-as-paradigm – "Grim was the barter, red the trade," or "the prison of satin and gold" known as "Culture and Art" – should not distract us from realizing that the Texan was not the first to shoe and saddle this particular hobbyhorse. The cheerless tune of *Song* is audible in Henry David Thoreau's observation "It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf, that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were," and dates all the way back to Herodotus. The much-traveled Greek chose to end his *Histories* with a moral courtesy of Cyrus the Great. As translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt and A. R. Burns, the hero-king is urged to help himself to a "better" country. He does not burst into song, but he does anticipate *A Song of the Naked Lands:*

> "Soft countries breed soft men. It is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruits and good soldiers too."
>
> The Persians had to admit that this was true and Cyrus was wiser than they; so they left him, and chose rather to live in a rugged land and rule than to cultivate rich plains and be subject to others.[3]

The point to this quick look at the backstories of terms like "barbarian" or "naked lands" is that Howard dealt himself into debates that were old before 1492 and did not embarrass himself – one of the reasons why he would not embarrass the pantheon either.

But can that august-if-virtual institution be persuaded to take in a lowly pulpster? The Library of America allowed in Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, who made *Black Mask* a legend, years ago, but then allowances are easily made for the brass knucks

and coshes of hardboiled detective fiction, thanks to that subgenre's bruisingly unsparing reportorial function. Hammett and Chandler were also fortunate enough to have John Huston, Humphrey Bogart, and Howard Hawks adeptly adapting their work for another, even more popular medium. With Lovecraft's tentacles now snaking across the Library's threshold, perhaps the pulpily fantastic will win itself more space.

When he gave the title *Pulp Fiction* to one of the defining movies of the Nineties, Quentin Tarantino may or may not have intended to acknowledge the fact that the best pulps have aged well because they showcased work that turned out to be ageless, but Michael Chabon's sincerity in his Pulitzer Prize – winning novel *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, where he calls the pulps "argosies of blood and wonder," is incontrovertible. A democracy's pantheon should be hospitable to those who achieve excellence in intrinsically democratic venues. Stephen King, who came along too late for the pulps, started out by selling to even less prestigious markets like *Dude, Cavalier, Adam*, and *Swank*, and now seems poised for induction in the aftermath of his 2003 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters (an event that reduced Defender of the Canon Harold Bloom to weeping tears of blood).

Paul Seydor's "reconsideration" of Sam Peckinpah's Westerns is deservedly admired for seeing those movies as if for the first time and with the clearest of eyes. While trying to find a niche in the pantheon for his artist, Seydor singles out American literature's "fascination – bordering, some might argue, on the pathological – with the exotic, the foreign, the criminal, and the wild. This fascination in turn results in a fiction that rarely moves far from escapist genres. The reasons our artists give for this almost always reduce to the same one when we cut through the rhetoric of individualism and freedom: the insufficiency of mainstream American life to vitalize the imagination." Sure enough, Howard's imagination was vitalized by the exotic, the foreign, the criminal, the wild. With transatlantic voyages not yet an option, the only New World available to Donald MacDeesa in *Lord of Samarcand*, who hails from the uttermost West of his day, is the East; he is limited to

crossing seas of sand and oceans of grass. Yet how well Leslie Fiedler's summation of classic American tales in general, and Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym in particular – "And through it all the outcast wanderer, equally in love with death and distance, seeks some absolute elsewhere" – suits the wayward clansman as he looks back down "the bitter trail of his life" and hugs an isolation colder than the bones of the moon. If Seydor is correct, if the truest American writing is fringe writing, all edge and no center, then by working the genre fringe Robert E. Howard teleported himself smack-dab into the center, the dream-center, of our culture. When everything is margin, marginalization becomes moot.

The title of one of the poems in this volume, *Which Will Scarcely Be Understood*, would do as well for a summary of Howard's critical reception, such as it was, until the late Seventies at the earliest. And yet much of the cryptography needed to decode his meaningfulness had already been done. "During my last year in college, I'd read several of D. H. Lawrence's books," Novalyne Price tells us in *One Who Walked Alone*. "I could see they were sexy. I didn't know whether to tell Bob about reading them or not." Had she dipped into Lawrence's nonfiction as well as his fiction, specifically 1923's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, she would have bristled with a whole arsenal of talking points when making the case for Howard's pantheon-readiness to cousin Enid.

Lawrence's survey is as eccentrically electric, or electrically eccentric, as any of the newly identified classics he was covering, and no better description of what he was up to exists than cultural historian Ann Douglas' in her *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, which despite its title is about much, much more than Manhattan or the 1920s:

> The "essential American soul," [Lawrence] proclaimed, is "hard, isolate, stoic," and a "killer." America is full of "vampires," the "terrible … ghosts" of the black and red men the white settlers had exterminated, exploited, and, unbeknownst to themselves, envied and assimilated. For Lawrence, America was a King Kong figure – King Kong's cinematic debut was only a decade away – careening amid the wasteland of the West, and he was King Kong's prophet.[4]

Douglas goes on to stress that "Lawrence called the American literature he was writing about 'classic' – recognized and revered, in other words, by those acknowledged to be best able to judge the matter – but next to no one knew it. Using the term was, in fact, a publicity stunt, Lawrence's bold bid to canonize a group of authors who were largely ignored, forgotten, or misread." Cooper, Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville were for him avatars of a shadow-side America, the "inner nature of brutality [of which was] more extreme and more at odds with its public mask and voice than was the case anywhere else." When the mask slipped, when Kong broke his chains, as per Douglas paraphrasing Lawrence, "America might be the only nation capable, if uncensored and unchecked, of flooding the civilized world with what William Carlos Williams called in his self-consciously Lawrentian study *In the American Grain* (1925), 'rich regenerative violence.' "

And flood the civilized world it did, with red harvests and blood meridians, wild bunches and magnum forces. Imagery that conjures a civilized world flooded, by forces at last unchecked, with rich regenerative violence is of course also ground zero for Howard studies. Lawrence's "bold bid to canonize" leads straight to Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* trilogy about the mythology of the American frontier, and to Howard's most powerful work. Those of us who've worked on *The Best of Robert E. Howard* are driven by a "self-consciously Lawrentian agenda" of our own – we too are partisans of a writer "largely ignored, forgotten, or misread," and we're sure that because his finest stories are classic, "though next to no one [knows] it," they should be promoted as such in a repeat of Lawrence's 1923 "publicity stunt."

The slightest suggestion of Howard's induction-potential will have some of the unconverted demanding the installation of a metal detector in the pantheon's entrance. Is the violence that convulses Howard's stories rich and regenerative, or just rote? "This young man has the power to feel. He knows nothing of war, yet he is drenched with blood," Ambrose Bierce conceded of Stephen Crane. Similarly drenched if similarly unbaptized by fire, Howard too

possessed a power to *feel* that his readers never cease to feel. Jack London was the authorial father-figure who taught the Texan the most about luring romanticism into the dark alleys where realism was waiting. George Orwell thought London "essentially a short-story writer," conspicuous for "his love of brutality and physical violence and, in general, what is known as 'adventure.' " Alfred Kazin for his part noted in his 1942 overview of modern American literature *On Native Ground*, "Nothing is so important about London as the fact that he came on the scene at a time when the shocked consciousness of a new epoch demanded the kind of heady violence that he was always so quick to provide." Howard, who came of age in an even newer epoch, trafficked in even more unsparing violence; early in *Lord of Samarcand* a battlefield's "shrieks of dire agony still [rise] to the shivering stars which [peer] palely out, as if frightened by man's slaughter of man."

Yes, his work is full of swords, but they are often double-edged, and a preoccupation with the survival of the fittest is shadowed by the certainty that both fitness and survival are fleeting. At his best, Howard was a purveyor not of cheap thrills but of frissons costly for both the writer and his more alert readers. "One problem in writing bloody literature," he mused to HPL in 1932, "is to present it in such a manner as to avoid a suggestion of cheap blood-and-thunder melodrama – which is what some people will always call action, regardless of how realistic and true it is." In an April 1932 letter Howard vented, "I'll swear, I've written of Christian armies being defeated by Moslems until my blood fairly seethes with rage. Some day I must write of the success of the earlier Crusades to gratify my racial vanity." He never did (and perhaps would not have been able to had he tried), but in *Lord of Samarcand* Donald MacDeesa topples both Bayazid the Thunderer and Timour the Lame – the pistol shot with which he redresses his grievance with the latter is anachronistic, but also precociously American.

Dirge-dire, *Lord* is enough of a revenge tragedy to frighten a Jacobean. If Howard the poet likens the nations Timour tramples underfoot to "lost women crying in the mountains at night," Howard the dramaturge takes over when MacDeesa assures Bayazid,

“I would go through greater hells to bring you to the dust!” The Texan blithely challenges both Christopher Marlowe and Edgar Allan Poe; indeed, by helping himself to several chapter epigraphs, Howard induces Poe to attend his somber feast even as Bayazid is forced to be present at Timour’s. This volume’s *Son of the White Wolf*, wherein the titular predator is a rough beast whose hour comes round again in one of the Great War’s only “glamorous” sideshows, also aspires to be “bloody literature.” Bloody, and prescient – cultures force-marching themselves into imagined pasts in pursuit of illusory purity and predestination are a regrettably familiar phenomenon to us in the twenty-first century.

Black Vulmea’s Vengeance demonstrates that Howard was potentially a pirate novelist capable of boarding the flagships of Stevenson and Sabatini, but also transcends “cheap blood-and-thunder melodrama” in its exploration of mercy as a form of revenge more devastating to its undeserving recipient than even the most massively retaliatory payback would be. Living with one’s own crimes can be more painful and more protracted than dying because of them. Elsewhere we find a vignette swollen into a metaphor in *The Man on the Ground*, as a feud-driven Texan’s hatred, “an almost tangible abstraction – a hate too strong for even death to destroy; a hate powerful enough to embody itself in itself, without the aid or necessity of material substance,” outlives him among dry-gulching-facilitating rocks “hotter than the hearthstones of hell.” D. H. Lawrence speaks in his chapter on *The Scarlet Letter* of “a black and complementary hatred, akin to love,” and Howard was no stranger to that perverse intimacy situated in the far regions of antipathy. Witness not only *The Man on the Ground* but also the final story in this volume, *Red Nails*, as remarkable an American treatment of the feudist cul-de-sac as there’s been since Huck Finn, caught up in the quarrel between the Shepherdson and Grangerford clans, was told “by-and-by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud. But it’s kind of slow, and takes a long time.”

The story’s inspiration has little to do with the Hyborian Age and much to do with the Lincoln County War in which Billy the Kid shot to fame as a shootist. As Patrice Louinet explains in *Hyborian Genesis*

Part III (see *The Conquering Sword of Conan)*, a vacation that took Howard to the hyperbolically haunted site of Lincoln, New Mexico, left him speculating as to whether "the nature of the Bonito Valley determined the nature of the feud – narrow, concentrated, horrible." What was for him local, or at least regional, color also appears in the story's "cactus-dotted plain" and reference to "cliff-dwellings of the mysterious brown people" – we are not far from Brian Attebery's description of Burroughs' Barsoom, "a dream or fantasy vision of the American Southwest." As Rusty Burke comments in his in-depth study *Journey Inside: The Quest of the Hero in Red Nails*, much of the story's nomenclature – Olmec, Chicmec, Tezcoti, Xuchotl – "rings with the history of the Pre-Columbian peoples of Mexico and Central America, from whom Howard drew for the story's proper names." Pre-Columbian shadings may also have contributed to what the Texan teased to Clark Ashton Smith as being "the grimmest, bloodiest, and most merciless story of the series so far," the elements of the Mesoamerican worldview that T. R. Fehrenbach, in his *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico*, summarized as "magic and mystery, blood and horror," all perceived through "a filter of darkest night, or in a violent blast of sun blaze."

Another New World underpinning is disclosed when we learn that the "sinister crimson" city was founded on the enslavement and slaughter of black people. (Xuchotl does not seem to be haunted by these original victims, but maybe, just maybe, everything that befalls all subsequent citizens, whether Kosalan or Tlazitlan, can be traced to the founding atrocity.) Conan and Valeria, the two adventurers who tip the balance of the feud, are once and future Aquilonians respectively, and therefore, given the special significance of Aquilonia (which in the Conan series "reigns supreme in the dreaming West"), Americans of a sort. The Cimmerian grins "hardily" when he accepts an offer from the Tecuhltli – "We're both penniless vagabonds. I'd as soon kill Xotalancas as anybody" – thereby expressing an unmistakably American attitude: the history behind other people's feuds is of little importance, and space, the essential New World resource, heals the wounds that time turns gangrenous.

But a December 1934 letter to Lovecraft in which Howard professes himself indifferent to European "squabbles and massacres," describing the continent as "nothing but a rat-den where teeming, crowded rodents, jammed together in an unendurable mass, squeal and gnash and murder each other," cautions us against too quickly single-sourcing the story. Europe had been a Xuchotl in 1916 – note that the city has its own no-man's-land, the Halls of Silence which lie between the feuding factions – and by 1935 looked to be one again, as the postwar years in which Howard grew up gave way to prewar years during which he and others grew aware that dictatorships were calling the tune to which democracies desperately danced. Neither entirely an Old World story nor entirely a New World story, *Red Nails* becomes an *underworld* story, a visit to a realm sealed off and trapped by the cave-in of Tlazitlan sanity. Murmurous with the ghosts of old murders, Xuchotl rises architecturally above several ossuaries' worth of skeletons at its foundation but morally descends into "the black corridors and realms of the subterranean world." D. H. Lawrence called Poe "an adventurer into vaults and cellars and horrible underground passages of the human soul," and from those same passages in *Red Nails* the Crawler, the Burning Skull, and the pipes of madness emerge, while Tolkemec, Howard's *diabolus ex machina*, returns from the vaults of the dead as memorably as anyone has since Madeline Usher. Xuchotl surpasses even the Blassenville Manor of *Pigeons from Hell* as a contender to be Howard's equivalent of Shirley Jackson's Hill House, Stephen King's Overlook Hotel, or Poe's palace of Prince Prospero – "And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel" covers the people of Xuchotl as well as the masquers of the Red Death.

In the stories just mentioned our pantheon prospect asked rather than evaded questions about the vengeance-imperative that powers so much genre fiction; and although he could be as pulpy as the occasion warranted – "How long can you avoid the fangs of the Poison People?" an especially odious high priest taunts a cobra-beset dancer in one of the Conan stories – the truth is that we're dealing with an overachiever, a better writer than he needed to be

to succeed in the markets available to him. Lovecraft beat everyone else to this realization while grieving for his friend in print: “He was greater than any profit-making policy he could adopt – for even when he outwardly made concessions to Mammon-guided editors and commercial critics, he had an internal force and sincerity which broke the surface and put the imprint of his personality on everything he wrote.” The imagery here, “internal force and sincerity” breaking the surface and imprinting themselves, is precisely what D. H. Lawrence sought and found in his chosen American classics. And to Lovecraft’s tribute we can append the follow-up assertion that Howard was also greater than the profit-making policies adopted by too many of those who presumed to package his work in the decades after his death.

A natural, he possessed the unnatural degree of dedication and perseverance that getting the most out of being a natural entails. In her memoir *How It Was*, Mary Hemingway quoted her husband Ernest as having said, “The secret is that it is poetry written into prose and it is the hardest of all things to do”; in some ways it was a little easier for Howard, much more of a born poet if much less of a prose revolutionary than Hemingway, with a bardic knack for investing subjectivity and selectivity through the sheer rightness of word-choices with much of the irrefutability of objectivity. His style is rather like the second of the two gifts the Nemedian girl Zenobia gives the dungeon-immured Conan in *The Hour of the Dragon* (the first being his freedom): “It was no slender stiletto, selected because of a jeweled hilt or gold guard, fitted only for dainty murder in milady’s boudoir; it was a forthright poniard, a warrior’s weapon, broad-bladed, fifteen inches in length, tapering to a diamond-sharp point.” The forthright and undainty pointedness of Howard’s best prose is equally diamond-sharp. A character resents “the slow fading of the light as a miser begrudges the waning of his gold.”

“All the sanity” goes out of another’s face “like a flame blown out by the wind.” The lightning-bolts of an epic storm are “veiled in the falling flood like fire shining through frosted glass, turning the world to frosty silver.”

The active voice usurps the passive like one of Howard's pushful swordsmen ousting an enfeebled dynasty, and the pathetic fallacy could not work harder for him were it his indentured servant, as in one of this volume's nerve-shredding crescendos, *Wings in the Night:* "A shuddering white-faced dawn crept back over the black hills to shiver above the red shambles that had been the village of Bogonda." To describe the vitality that crackles through his paragraphs we can enlist the aid of the reborn, regenerated-through-violence Esau Cairn in *Almuric*, Howard's unfinished roughing-up of the Burroughsian planetary romance: "I tingled and burned and stung with life to the finger tips and the ends of my toes. Every sinew, vein, and springy bone was vibrant with the dynamic flood of singing, pulsing, humming life." Looking again to Ann Douglas' *Terrible Honesty*, we read that "Vitality, not verisimilitude, is the criterion of classic American literature; it offers a portrait of energy itself, of the adrenaline of the psyche, a portrait in which the external landscape is never separate from the landscape within." Howard specializes in portraits of energy itself and constantly injects his work with the adrenaline of his psyche – many of his opening paragraphs are not so much invitations to continue reading as forcible abductions. American exceptionalism is perhaps better suited to literature than geopolitics, and Howard's immediacy and intensification combine for an exceptionalism like a Texas-accented emanation of Archibald MacLeish's "continent where the heat was hotter and the cold was colder and the sun was brighter and the nights were blacker and the distances were farther and the faces were nearer and the rain was more like rain and the mornings were more like mornings than anywhere else on earth – sooner or sweeter and lovelier over unused hills."

He is rarely given to stately symmetry, and if some of his work (though not supremely accomplished tales like *Worms of the Earth* or *Lord of Samarcand)* can be jagged, jittery, and joltingly uneven, we need only remember that the most influential writing about the American classics often considers not whether the glass is half empty or half full, but why it tends to be half cracked. Richard Chase in his *The American Novel and Its Tradition* stresses the "radical

disunities and contradictions" and attraction to "extreme ranges of experience" of the best American novels, while the eminent critic George Steiner once observed that "the uncertainties of taste in Poe, Hawthorne and Melville and the obscuring idiosyncrasies of their manner point directly to the dilemmas of individual talent producing in relative isolation." We don't think the idiosyncrasies of Howard's manner are obscuring, except perhaps to certain bouncers on the pantheon payroll, but as a later but arguably even more isolated individual talent, he too was making much of it up as he went along, which brings us to his claim that he "was the first to light a torch of literature in this part of the country, however small, frail, and easily extinguished that flame may be. I am, in my way, a pioneer."

In his essay *Southwestern Literature?*, Larry McMurtry comments, "The tendency to practice symbolic frontiersmanship might almost be said to characterize the twentieth century Texan," and that tendency is almost impossible to avoid when discussing the twentieth-century Texan who concerns us here. Howard's self-identification as a torch-lighting trailblazer is not only symbolic frontiersmanship but a striking example of a well-known Leslie Fiedler generalization: "[The American writer] is forever beginning, saying for the first time (without real tradition there can never be a second time) what it is like to stand alone before nature, or in a city as appallingly lonely as any virgin forest."[5] In *Terrible Honesty* Ann Douglas sketches the "culturally impoverished" Ernest Hemingway, "starting in some sense from scratch, less freighted with cultural baggage," and therefore freed up to "fashion, with little resistance or waste, the new literary tools the modern experience demanded." The culturally impoverished and isolated Howard labored long in a short life to fashion the new literary tools his startlingly modern varieties of heroic fantasy and historical adventure demanded.

Being a literary fire-bringer and torchbearer in West Texas was the only way in which progress still permitted Howard to be a pioneer. "He should have lived his life a generation before, when men threw a wide loop and rode long trails," he writes of his doomed hero in *Wild Water*, one of the stories we're most excited

about including in this collection, and although Howard himself could continue throwing wide loops and riding long trails at his typewriter, that wasn't enough for him. "What I want is impossible, as I've told you before," he emphasized in a 1933 letter to Lovecraft, "I want, in a word, the frontier – which is compassed in the phrase, new land, open land, free land – land rich and unbroken and virgin, swarming with game and laden with fresh forests and sweet cold streams, where a man could live by the sweat of his hands unharried by taxes, crowds, noise, unemployment, bank-failures, gang-extortions, laws, and all the other wearisome things of civilization." The Howard heroes Francis Xavier Gordon and Esau Cairn, both born "in the Southwest, of old frontier stock," light out for improbable territories where they need not try to pry open Frederick Jackson Turner's closed frontier. Gordon, represented in *The Best of Robert E. Howard* by *Hawk of the Hills* and *Son of the White Wolf*, hurls himself into "howling adventures among the Indians," only now the wild warriors are those of Afghanistan and Arabia. Cairn is hurled through space by one Professor Hildebrand's teleportation device to a paradoxical interstellar homecoming:

> I had neither companionship, books, clothing, nor any of the things which go to make up civilization. According to the cultural viewpoint, I should have been most miserable. I was not. I revelled in my existence. My being grew and expanded. I tell you, the natural life of mankind is a grim battle for existence against the forces of nature, and any other form of life is artificial and without realistic meaning.

Someone living that vicariously through Cairn's frontier-fresh start is unlikely to be either urbane or urban, although *The Tower of the Elephant* begins at the bottom, in a (mean)-street-level beggars' banquet where only "watchmen, well paid with stained coins," represent law and order. The setting of *Vultures of Wahpeton* is a cluster of mining camps with pretensions to townhood, not a city, but in its gold rush throes, Wahpeton effectively caricatures the unrestrained capitalism Franklin Delano Roosevelt was saving from itself while Howard worked on his novella: a welter of getting and spending, gouging and fleecing, wheeling and dealing in smoke-

filled rooms and gunsmoke-filled dives. More typically dreamlike are Samarcand – when Donald MacDeesa looks upon that Central Asian capital for the first time, it "[shimmers] to his gaze, mingling with the blue of the distance," like "a city of illusion and enchantment" – and the fireworks-bedecked Constantinople of *The Shadow of the Vulture*, a "realm of shimmering magic, with the minarets of its mosques like towers of fire in an ocean of golden foam." The most mysterious of all cities for Howard is obviously domesticity, and although drawn to the Middle Ages, he had difficulty imagining middle age for himself or his characters. Still, if Conan in a standoff with Valeria and Gottfried von Kalmbach flummoxed by Red Sonya are mere skirmishes in the battle of the sexes, they are skirmishes fought zestfully by both combatants. And the "pastoral quietude" of a chance meeting between a disenchanted king and a distraught slave girl in *By This Axe I Rule!* should serve as a warning against underestimating this writer's range.

What's more, different kinds of range exist; Howard certainly ranged across recorded history and the invitingly blank pages of unrecorded history. In *The Star Rover* Jack London imagines a "rider full-panoplied and astride of time," and his Texan admirer, for whom that novel was something of a sacred text, clung convincingly to bucking temporal broncos in his historical fiction, especially a set of stories from the early Thirties that pit Crusaders against Eastern conquerors. Here the contending supernatural forces are not Jehovah and Allah but Hubris and Nemesis. *The Shadow of the Vulture* features "the Armageddon of races, Asia against Europe," but equally stupendous and far more exotic is the death-grapple between Asia and Asia when Bayazid and Timour meet in *Lord of Samarcand*, as "the thunder of cymbals and kettle-drums" contends with the "awesome trumpeting" of war-elephants, and "blasts of arrows and sheets of fire" wither "men in their mail like burnt grain."

To range we should also add reach, and a refusal to be intimidated by historical distances and distinctions. The English specialist in American literature Tony Tanner was struck by the brashness with which T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound availed themselves

of “fragments of the world’s past and disparate cultures to build their own private worlds. This sort of relatively unfettered eclecticism when dealing with the past is peculiarly American and an utterly different thing from the European writer’s sense of the past. If anything it negates the historical sense … The results and new juxtapositions can be brilliant, breathtakingly original and very un-European.” The Hyborian Age of the Conan stories also looms in Carl Van Doren’s comparison of James Branch Cabell’s fantasies to *The Faerie Queen:* “Geographical and chronological boundaries melt and flow, wherein fable encroaches upon history, and the creative mood of the poet re-cuts his shining fabrics as if they were whole cloth intended solely for his purposes.” And when Tanner says of Herman Melville’s prose that with “its vast assimilations, its seemingly opportunistic eclecticism, its pragmatic and improvisatory nonchalance, its capacious grandiloquence and demotic humour, it is indeed a style for America – the style of America,” he also captures many of the stylistic attributes of an American named Robert E. Howard. Opportunistic eclecticism and improvisatory nonchalance can’t help but improve a talented writer’s range.

Also pertinent to this issue is the fact that Howard spent much of his time at the typewriter trying to make editors and readers *laugh*. Sailor Steve Costigan, the “ordinary ham-an’-egger” who broke big for his creator in the pugilistically inclined pulp *Fight Stories*, is represented here by *The Bull Dog Breed*. Steve comes equipped with a concussion-proof skull and a repercussion-proof gullibility, and the stories about him focus on the ties that bind man and “Dublin gentleman” bulldog, and the inability of two-fistedness to keep up with two-facedness. A few years later Breckinridge Elkins, the first and most illustrious of Howard’s mountain man man-mountains, arrived as discreetly and understatedly as a rockslide, and he was soon joined by Pike Bearfield. Pragmatically cloned for a new market, Bearfield acquires his own, epistolary-narrative-shaking identity in this volume’s G*ents on the Lynch*, and also *The Riot at Bucksnort* and *A Gent from the Pecos*.

The farther west the English language got, the greater its Americanization, as Paul Horgan recognizes: “Its inflations and exaggerations were brandished in reply to the vastness of the West, the bulk of mountains, where man was so little. If there was vulgarity in its expression, there was also pathos, for what showed plain was the violent dancing of a spirit that must assert or be lost.” Only a generation or two removed from all of this, Howard knew what he wanted to recapture for Pike Bearfield and Breck Elkins; to Lovecraft in 1931 he admitted, “Western folkways and traditions are so impregnated with savagery, suffering and strife, that even Western humor is largely grim, and, to non-Westerners, often grotesque.” The savagery, suffering, and strife of *Vultures of Wahpeton*–esque elements like Mustang Stirling’s outlaws and a Vigilante Committee are reprised farcically in *Gents*, as Bearfield’s spirit dances violently in passages like “Folks is always wanting to lynch me, and quite a few has tried, as numerous tombstones on the boundless prairies testifies.” *Gents* also features Howard, who seethed over attempts by Easterners to impose their frames of reference on the Southwest, gleefully imposing a Southwesterner’s frame of reference on the most hallowed events of East Coast history: “He said the Britishers was going to sneak out of a town named Boston which I jedge must have been a right sizable cowtown or mining-camp or something, and was going to fall on the people unawares and confiscate their stills and weppins and steers and things.”

The man responsible for a story called *By This Axe I Rule!* is likely to disdain check-swings of that axe; not for Howard the hedging of bets and eying of exits found in earlier American fantastic fiction. He did not so much write his stories down or type them out as *commit* them – and *commit to* them. For Ann Douglas, Melville’s books “move forward when he is in close connection with himself, in the grip of his daemon.” That is also true of Howard, to the point where he abandoned several fan-favorite characters because the close connection had been lost; his daemon had shifted his grip. But the grip is searingly, serratedly tight in, for example, *Wings of the Night;* Melville’s Ahab, a Quaker, describes himself as “madness

maddened" during his pursuit of the white whale, and the akaanas of *Wings* airlift Kane, the Puritan, to a similarly far gone state. Howard dwells upon their "fearful mirth to see men die wholesale," their "strange and grisly sense of humor [that is] tickled by the suffering of a howling human." We could be dealing with the "boys" of King Lear's "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport," although in this instance it is not the flies but the boys who are winged. While the akaanas are not divine or even supernatural, Howard does liken them to "demons flying back to hell through the dawn," and they call to mind Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* comment on the forests of Nathaniel Hawthorne: "The man who enters the wilderness hunting for something he regards as truth or power is always led to a place where devils dance in a ring, inviting him to a black Eucharist."

Having agreed with Lovecraft "that Puritanism provides a rich field for psychological study," in an October 1930 letter, Howard exploits that rich field in *Wings* as nowhere else in his Solomon Kane series. America's Puritan and African antecedents encounter each other in a "pre-American" setting: "the Dark Continent, land of shadows and horror, of bewitchment and sorcery, into which all evil things had been banished before the growing light of the western world." And yet the supposedly Dark Continent illuminates Solomon Kane as he seeks out the shadows, becomes most fully himself, acquires a context that his birthplace Devon, as is evidenced by the hail-and-farewell of *Solomon Kane's Homecoming*, can never hope to provide. In his 2004 essay *Heritage of Steel: Howard and the Frontier Myth*, Steven R. Trout memorably discusses the one-sided dialogue between Kane and the "shriveled, mummified head of Goru, whose eyes, strangely enough, did not change in the blaze of the sun or the haunt of the moon." Goru is an eloquent if wordless accuser; the Englishman has failed in what might otherwise seem an objectionably paternalistic role – proved better at being a Kane than being a Solomon. He is a king whose kingdom is raptored away from him, and the akaanas, it should be noted, arrive from Europe to prey upon and despoil – in effect, colonize – Africans.

As Brian Attebery emphasizes, "The American writer must find some way of reentering the ancient storytelling guild: he must validate his claim to the archetypes that are the tools of the trade." Howard's modus operandi involved straightforward breaking and entering, after which he helped himself to whatever archetypes he needed. Thus the harpies of *Wings*, on loan from Jason and the Argonauts, and the advisory to readers at the start of *The Valley of the Worm* acknowledging that they "have heard the tale before in many guises wherein the hero was named Tyr, or Perseus, or Siegfried, or Beowulf, or Saint George" – and yet it is Niord/James Allison/Robert E. Howard who knows best, by dint of having *known first*. Such effrontery is a way for the American fantasist to plant his feet and his feats. Against the Conqueror Worm, Howard sets the worm-conqueror in not only *The Valley of the Worm* but also *Red Nails*.

In 1938 J. R. R. Tolkien, moonlighting as a draconologist not long after he had unleashed Smaug, "the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities," in *The Hobbit*, assured an audience of children in an Oxford lecture that a dragon is "more terrible than any dinosaur" and "the final test of heroes," so it is quite fitting that a dragon should test Conan the Cimmerian in his final adventure (final in the sense of last to be written). Howard's hero brings, of course, a forthrightly American attitude to the confrontation: "There's no law against killing a dragon, is there?" is his libertarian question to Olmec in an early draft of *Red Nails*. In his indispensable Beowolf: *The Monsters and the Critics*, Tolkien makes the case that "there are in any case many heroes but very few good dragons," and faults the *Beowulf*-dragon for "not being dragon enough," due to trace elements of symbolism and allegory that threaten to dilute the effectiveness of "some vivid touches of the right kind." His ideal is a "real worm, with a bestial life and thought of his own." Howard's dragon in *Red Nails* is *nothing but* vivid touches and bestial life, hungry, enraged, vengeful – woe betide any allegorical readings foolish enough to be caught downwind of him. He squats "watching [Conan and Valeria's crag] with the frightful patience of the reptile folk. So might one of his brood have glared up at their troglodyte

ancestors, treed on a high-flung rock, in the dim dawn ages." Later he wallows on the ground "like a dog with pepper in its eyes," and "a noisy gurgling and lapping" betrays his attempt to quench his poison-inflamed thirst.

Conan, who will soon be faced with the riotously unnatural Xuchotl, broad-jumps the abyss of ages and the great divide between mammal and reptile to accept the dragon as a fellow natural born killer: "He attributed to it characteristics similar to his own, and saw in its wrath a counterpart of his rages, in its roars and bellowings merely reptilian equivalents to the curses he had bestowed upon it." Unlike Sigurd Fafnir's-bane, he does not need to dine on dragon-heart to gain understanding, and that he feels "a kinship with all wild things, even dragons" makes Conan wilder and the dragon more real. Seldom exhibiting an appetite for fantasy of any sort, the American pantheon has never been motivated to seek out a definitive New World dragonslaying, but were it to do so, *Red Nails* would be waiting.

Like many Americans, some of whom are now pantheon residents, Howard preferred to skirt, or slink away from, certain of the misshapen menhirs and dolmens that stand out so starkly in our psychic landscape. Comforting though it would be to report that he was ahead of his time in his views on people who did not look like him, he was simply, even simplistically, of his time in his over-reliance on "race," a construct both highly artificial and built with the shoddiest of materials, as an organizing principle. Howardists are fond of recalling one occasion on which Steven R. Trout, for whom the celebrating-in-the-endzone triumphalism of *Wings in the Night* about the "white-skinned conqueror" just got to be too much, remarked, "I don't remember ever seeing such a clear indication that ol' Bob would've lost money had he bet the Louis/Schmeling fight."

Still, when considering a story like this volume's *Pigeons from Hell* it is worth remembering that African-Americans stimulated Howard's imagination when he was a child – witness one tale he recalled to Lovecraft, invariably set in "the ruins of a once thriving plantation," in which "always, as [vagrants] approach the high-

columned verandah through the high weeds that surround the house, great numbers of pigeons rise from their roosting places on the railing and fly away" – and, in ways that will not appease all readers nowadays, troubled his conscience when he was an adult. "I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" insists Quentin Compson when he is accused of hating the South at the end of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Howard, a Southwesterner rather than a Southerner, was never quite as much on the defensive as is Harvard student Quentin "in the iron New England dark." And yet we should not lose sight of the fact that "South" comes before "west" in the word "Southwest," so Southern pride goes before, or remains after, a fall, the possibility of which would never have occurred to the less history-burdened. Clark Edward Clifford acknowledges the complicated shadows in his *In the Deep Heart's Core: Reflections on Life, Letters, and Texas:* "Even if we manage to kill Mexicans and Indians with John Wayne remorselessness, Southern-ness lurks in the shadows, ever ready to remind us that we too have done something wrong, have lost a war, have declined, have once been human."

Have once been human – or, in some instances, inhuman. "Her past and her traditions are close to my heart, though I would be a stranger within her gates," Howard once wrote of the South, and Griswell, the (Lovecraft-esque?) New Englander of *Pigeons From Hell*, permits the Texan to return as a stranger to the strangest of American lands. If not quite a first person narrator, Griswell is first among equals as a third person actor in the story; he's the viewpoint character, and his viewpoint is that of "frantic abhorrence of these black woods, the ancient plantation houses that hid forgotten secrets of slavery and bloody pride." Howard was capable of confiding, "I have often wished strongly that I had lived on the ancestral plantations in the Deep South in the days before the Civil War," or maintaining that the horrors of slavery were frequently exaggerated, but we have evidence that he was not so much a loyal son as a transplanted grandson who knew a bit too much to be quite as loyal as he would have liked.

In *Pigeons* he does not insult our intelligence with blameless Blassen-villes, social workers who happen to own a plantation, apostles of outreach and uplift victimized by their motivelessly malevolent maid Joan. But neither can he bring himself to insult regional pride by attributing to a rootedly Southern, irreproachably bloodlined family atrocious mismanagement of their human property. So the Blassenvilles turn out to be of European origin and Caribbean extremism, in Sheriff Buckner's words a "French-English family. Came here from the West Indies before the Louisiana Purchase. The Civil War ruined them, like it did so many." Quicker to apply the whip and slower to leave off because they "got their ideas in the West Indies," as Buckner puts it, the family is convenient for Howard's conflicted purposes, and it is only logical that Celia, "the last one of the family to come to these parts," hence even less of an adoptive Southerner than her relatives, is the cruelest of the cruel.

While Celia is drawn to voodoo culture, Joan, her victim and subsequent victimizer, has "white blood in her," and pride of her own. In a sense they are each other's weird sisters, and instead of an American melting pot *Pigeons* posits a bubbling witches' cauldron in which what should be the boundaries between Celia and Joan dissolve – the identities and fates of the two characters are not disentangled until the final paragraph. Howard's dark American fantasy reflects multihued American reality in that the disentanglement of fates and identities is impossible.

In the quasi-autobiographical *Post Oaks & Sand Roughs*, Howard's false start at a novel in the late Twenties, his alter ego announces, "Now, I wish for a fair craft, three-masted, full-sailed, with a fair wind and a clear sea path – to where? The Isles of Yesterday, mayhap, or the coasts of Romance, or the beaches of Adventure, or the turquoise sea of Dawn." But by the time he wrote to fellow pulp pro E. Hoffmann Price on February 15, 1936, he lamented having "gone so far along the path of romantic-exotic writing that it's devilish difficult to find my way back to common-place realism, and yet every urge in me is to write realism." Realism nevertheless accompanied him on that romantic-exotic path; *Post Oaks & Sand*

Roughs provides the too-much-too-soon observation, “A boom town drugstore is an ideal place to study humanity,” and in 1931 Howard told Farnsworth Wright, “My boyhood was spent in the oil country – or rather oil came into the country when I was still a young boy, and remained.” *Oil came, oil remained* – where others saw a windfall, a resource to be exploited, Howard saw an invading force, an occupying army. In many of his letters he stole a march on the distinguished historian Bernard DeVoto, who in works like 1947’s *Across the Wide Missouri* described the American West as “a plundered province,” one that was being “systematically looted.”

“The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization,” Roosevelt declared in his First Inaugural in 1933. The temples of Howard’s civilizations were frequently the haunts of horrors, so he presumably approved of FDR’s words. If, like the Thirties-redolent hard-boileds in the pages of *Black Mask*, certain Conan stories flirt with vulgar Marxism, vulgar Marxism has aged better than any other kind. “Aye, I’ve seen men fall and die of hunger against the walls of shops and storehouses crammed with food,” the Cimmerian marvels in *The Black Stranger*, and when a former fence protests that he is now “respectable” in *The Hour of the Dragon*, Conan’s derisive reply is, “Meaning you’re rich as hell.” Another story dispenses with “the long, long ago when another world lifted its jeweled spires to the stars” while retaining the low expectations of high finance. At the start of *Wild Water* a bankrupt farmer’s unspeaking but unyielding neighbors, who ensure by their “hard-eyed” auction attendance that his property is not snapped up but instead sold right back to him for a pittance, are familiar to us from Depression iconography. This story outdoes *Vultures of Wahpeton* in depositing the Howard hero in a situation, in a civilization, where he can no longer be the Howard hero. “Times is changed, can’t you understand?” another character says to Jim Reynolds, “a throwback, the personification of atavism.” Hailing from “the high ridge of the Lost Knob country” (Did Howard intend a joke about post-frontier emasculation when he fictionalized Cross Plains as Lost Knob?) Reynolds is both “dark as an Indian” and the owner of a Ford roadster. Although still a bit larger than life, he is

smaller than the system at the center of which sits Saul Hopkins, the financier who pulls strings "to which were tied loans and mortgages and the subtle tricks of finance." (As Howard saw fit to bestow "the hooked nose of a vulture" upon him, it comes as a relief that the character's last name is Hopkins.)

"I am hemmed in by laws, laws, laws," Kull roars in *By This Axe I Rule!*, but he ultimately shatters the most superannuated of those laws. Jim Reynolds, born into a different sort of Pre-Cataclysmic Age, is far more hemmed in. He can gun down the king of Locust Valley, but can never hope to declare himself "king, state, and law!" like Kull. State and Law are too much for him, or any man, as the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of the frontier in the more-than-meteorological storm of *Wild Water*. Like Harry Morgan, gutshot in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, Reynolds dies cursing, done in not by the lawmen with whom he is hell-bent on shooting it out, but by a friend. That friend, Bill Emmett, has taken up residence where those wronged by modernity often relocate, in the Book of Revelations, from which he is eager to visit an "awful mountain of black water" on the low-lying town of Bisley and witness the "Locust and Mesquital rollin' down like the rivers of Judgment." Although "on the devil's business," Emmett can quote scripture, but he is also capable of summoning the authentic voice of the twentieth century: "You're small stuff; you killed one enemy. I aim to kill thousands!"

Volume II of *The Best of Robert E. Howard* ends with one of his most memorable poems, which doubles as a prelude or overture to the Conan series. *Cimmeria* came to Howard just before the favorite son of that "land of Darkness and the Night" did, and the "I" who speaks throughout the poem, who effects the beautifully intuitive shift from "winds and clouds, and dreams that shun the sun" to "clouds and winds and ghosts that shun the sun" is not Conan but his creator. "I remember," that "I" declares; one cannot remember the future, and the absolute power that not-always mournful but neverending remembrance exercised over Howard may help to explain both the brevity of his life and the longevity of his storytelling. Cimmeria may not be a state of the Union, but it is a

state of mind, and as its creator stands before the pantheon-gates the fairminded should recognize the heritage that "wraps [him] in the grey apparel of ghosts."

He was an American classic as early as *The Shadow Kingdom* and its follow-up *The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune*, which asks, "What worlds within what worlds [await] the bold explorer?" and cranes from the Siege Perilous of the Valusian throne to glimpse "some far country of [Kull's] consciousness." Assessing his body of work, such as it then was, to his friend Tevis Clyde Smith in February 1929, Howard poor-mouthed *Mirrors* as "vague and badly written; this is the deepest story I ever tried to write and I got out of my depth." A good many classic American writers got to be classics by venturing out of *their* depth and diving instead of drowning, and in this story Howard discovered just how deep his depth truly was. The Hall of a Thousand Mirrors offers reflections that some who do not dream enough would never dream of encountering in a sword-and-sorcery story; Tuzun Thune's glassy surfaces reflect W. H. Auden's insight that most American stories "are parables; their settings, even when they pretend to be realistic, symbolic settings for a timeless and unlocated (because internal) psychomachia."[6]

The wizard's mirrors also reflect Ann Douglas' contention that an American trademark is the "[displacement of] mimesis … to what the critic Richard Poirier, speaking of American narrative and borrowing a term from Shakespeare's Coriolanus, has called 'a world elsewhere.' Forced into exile, Coriolanus turns the tables on those who exile him by telling them, 'I'll banish you. There is a world elsewhere.' " Douglas sees the "willful conversion of exile from the known and familiar world into an enhanced power of exploration and vision in another unknown but compelling world, this exchange of the recognizably real for a place or mode defined as more insistently real, a place where provincials are recognized as sovereigns" as the "central strategy of classic American literature." Kull, already exiled from his native Atlantis and a provincial grudgingly recognized as a sovereign, in *Mirrors* reaches the point of susceptibility to exchanging the recognizably real for the at-first-phantasmal-but-then-more-insistently real: "Day by day had he

seemed to lose touch with the world; all things had seemed each succeeding day more ghostly and unreal." Pantheon, please note: neither wars nor women nor wealth are won in *Mirrors* or *The Tower of the Elephant* – these are not stories of wish fulfillment but rather perspective-enhancement, imagination-enlargement.

Howard might have lit his pioneering torch in an unpromising hinterland, but he kindled imaginations around the world. That he lived and died with no inkling of the passion that his passionate storytelling would eventually ignite, or the power with which artists would respond to his power, is intolerable. He has created many, many readers and not a few writers as well, the more conscientious of whom have been determined, not to write like Howard but rather *to write, like Howard*. Brian Attebery accords L. Frank Baum, imperfections and all, the status of "our Grimm and our Andersen, the man who introduced Americans to their own dreams." Despite being an imperfect man and writer, Howard told perfectly wonderful stories that reintroduced twentieth-century Americans (and much of the world) to their own nightmares – but also to the chance of triumph, however hard-won and soon-lost, over those nightmares.

By now our confidence that Robert E. Howard could not help thinking or writing five classically American things before breakfast each morning must be apparent. "A writer who wishes to produce something both American and fantastic" is for Attebery compelled to "move against the currents, restoring what has been lost over the years or finding eddies of tradition that have resisted the general erosion of the marvelous." It's time to acknowledge that Howard, whose sense of loss was at least as keen as his other five senses, was eminently qualified to undertake such tasks. So here's to a viable, meritocratic, and open-audition-offering pantheon, one into which this author will not have to fight his way once his ability to write his way in is better known. His induction will leave the pantheon more sensitive to the call of the wild and the pall of the mild; more tragic but also more comic; more fantastic but also more realistic; brawnier, but more poetic; more physical, but more haunted. No other country in the world could have produced a Robert E.

Howard, and, regrettably, few other countries would have been as slow to realize his stature and significance. But as the afterlives of earlier classic writers' work have taught us, *late* is still much, much better than *never*.

---

1. "Civilized" and "barbaric" have continued to glower at each other in post-Howardian popular culture. The 1971 film *The Omega Man* is unsatisfactory as an adaptation of Richard Matheson's classic pandemic-of-vampirism novel *I Am Legend*, but Anthony Zerbe's Matthias could be channeling Howard when he says to Charlton Heston's Neville, "Barbarians? You call us barbarians? Well, it is an honorable name. We mean to cancel the world you civilized people made."

2. While abnormally dangerous, Conan is not "normally brutish"; a brutish hero would have been no hero at all to Howard. In his first-ever sale to *Weird Tales*, the Cro-Magnon versus Neanderthal grudge-match *Spear and Fang*, the protagonist Ga-nor is an artist, a "past master" of cave painting. Had Shippey had the chance to read the Conan stories in order of composition, as can now be done by way of *The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian, The Bloody Crown of Conan*, and *The Conquering Sword of Conan*, before seeing the Cimmerian in action he would have seen him in inaction, refusing to hang the seditious Rinaldo because "a great poet is greater than any king."

3. Howard seemingly takes direct aim at Cyrus in his only Conan novel, *The Hour of the Dragon*. Squiring his readers through the "palm trees and orange groves" of the sun-and-soil-blessed province of Poitain, he writes, "It is not only the hard lands that breed hard men."

4. We can be sure that Howard would have scrambled to see *King Kong*, but he did not share his reaction to the film in any letter that has survived. What is known is that he "got a big whang out of [Eugene] O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape,"* and in one of the poems included in this volume, "Never Beyond the Beast," he warns of the inescapability of "the blind black brutish passion – the lust of the primal Ape." Another poem cautions that "a strange shape comes to your faery mead/With a fixed black simian frown."

5. Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980), who was born in Indian Creek, Texas, and grew up in Kyle, is best known for stories such as *Pale Horse, Pale Rider, Noon Wine*, and her late-in-life novel *Ship of Fools*. Porter's first short story was published in 1922, so she beat Howard into print by three years. She also beat him out of Texas by a lifetime, and her relocations to Mexico, Greenwich Village, and Europe led McMurtry in *Southwestern Literature?* to draw a line in the dirt, like Travis at the Alamo, and pointedly exclude her:

"Let those who are free of Texas enjoy their freedom." Just how free of the state Porter ever was can be debated; in 1975 she insisted, "I happen to be the first native of Texas in its whole history to be a professional writer." This claim to fame goes all the way back to Virgil's *primus ego in patriam mecum deducam musas* ("for I shall be the first to bring the Muse into my country"), but it is disappointing that no one chronicling the history of Texas letters has ever juxtaposed Porter's statement and Howard's.

Like his, her imagination was jump-started by a yarn-spinning grandmother, and like him, she compensated for the lack of a formal higher education by ferociously concentrated autodidacticism: both writers illustrate the celebrated "Root, hog, or die" ideology in action. Arrestingly for students of the Howard-Lovecraft correspondence, Porter devoted fifty years to a biography of Cotton Mather, even living in Salem during 1927 and 1928 to absorb some witch-hunting atmosphere, but never finished the book.

6. Psychomachia: soul-strife, the mind warring on itself.

OceanofPDF.com

Notes on the Original Howard Texts

The texts for this edition of *The Best of Robert E. Howard, Volume Two*, were prepared by Rusty Burke, with the assistance of David Gentzel, Paul Herman, Glenn Lord, Patrice Louinet, and Rob Roehm. The stories have been checked either against Howard's original manuscripts and typescripts, copies of which were provided by Lord, or the first published appearance if a manuscript or typescript was unavailable. Every effort has been made to present the work of Robert E. Howard as faithfully as possible.

Deviations from the original sources are detailed in these textual notes. In the following notes, page, line, and word numbers are given as follows: 11.20.2, indicating this page, twentieth line, second word. Story titles, chapter numbers and titles, and breaks before and after chapter headings, titles, and illustrations are not counted; in poems, only text lines are counted. The page/line number will be followed by the reading in the original source, or a statement indicating the type of change made. Punctuation changes are indicated by giving the immediately preceding word followed by the original punctuation.

We have standardized chapter and numbering and titling: Howard's own practices varied, as did those of the publications in which these stories appeared. We have not noted those changes here.

By This Axe I Rule!

Text taken from Howard's draft, provided by Glenn Lord. The draft runs twenty pages, with several penciled-in annotations and corrections in Howard's hand. (Notes in the files of Howard's agent indicated the final version of the story, now presumed lost, ran

twenty-three pages.) Howard did not always cross out or erase the words or phrases to be replaced; these are mentioned only in case of doubt. 1.2.7: no comma after “dark”; 1.11.9: “the” capitalized; 1.15.1: comma instead of period after “man”; 1.18.1: comma instead of period after “imperturbably”; 2.2.4: exclamation instead of question mark after “swear”; 2.3.11: comma instead of period after “eyes”; 2.6.9: comma instead of period after “Ascalante”; 2.9.4: comma instead of period after “dagger”; 2.18.1: covenented; 2.19.11: no period after “minstrel”; 2.21.6: “the” capitalized; 2.28.5: unbroken; 2.33.3: Kananu; 2.34.8: body guard; 2.35.6: comma instead of period after “satisfaction”; 2.41.7: comma after “through”; 3.3.12: no period after “of”; 3.10.12: “what” capitalized; 3.16.7: he; 3.16.10: comma instead of period after “Kaanuub”; 3.21.1: inchoerencies; 3.23.11: shoulder; 3.27.2: every; 3.27.4: “the” capitalized; 3.29.8: comma after “skulking”; 3.34.7: no comma after “I”; 3.35.2: down fall; 3.39.11: comma instead of period after “outlaw”; 4.5.12: hare brained; 4.8.15: no comma after “men”; 4.9.3: no period after “me”; 4.12.2: it is unclear whether the phrase “the old dynasty” was to be deleted or not; it seems partly erased on the typescript; 4.13.8: king’s; 4.16.2: regeme; 4.18.14: “to” not in original; 4.25.2: “The Lament for the King” between double, not single, quotes; 4.25.4: For; 4.25.13: villian; 4.26.2: villifies; 4.26.5: “that black hearted savage” between double, not single, quotes; 4.32.8: no comma after “knight”; 5.15.1: Moreoever; 5.17.5: “this” capitalized; 5.17.8: states-craft; 5.19.8: comma instead of period after “Brule”; 5.21.13: comma instead of period after “enviously”; 6.6.2: dash after “barbarian”; 6.6.3: parenthesis before “when”; “when” not capitalized; 6.7.13: parenthesis after “me.”; 6.8.13: inscense; 6.13.4: comma instead of period after “notch”; 6.20.1: no comma after “forgotten”; 6.32.4: repbrobate; 6.34.5: “to” not in original; 6.37.10: comma instead of period after “sincerity”; 6.38.5: mean; 7.5.5: “there’s” capitalized; 7.5.14: no comma after “name”; 7.13.7: altar; 7.23.1: comma instead of period after “him”; 7.26.1: “not” not in original; 7.37.9: “Neither” not in original; 7.37.10: “you” capitalized; 7.38.1: altar; 7.39.6: weakning; 8.1.1: enmies; 8.2.9: admanant; 8.5.10: comma instead of period after “hand”;

8.14.10: betwen; 8.26.1: escpecially; 8.33.2: comma instead of period after “sir”; 8.33.3: she; 8.33.8: comma instead of period after “surprize”; 9.1.4: summonsed; 9.5.10: comma after “her”; 9.8.7: “the” capitalized; 9.20.7: comma instead of period after “heavily”; 9.23.4: comma instead of period after “wrath”; 9.27.1: Dont; 9.28.4: comma instead of period after “shoulder”; 9.31.4: semi-colon instead of period after “smiled”; 9.33.7: no comma after “asked”; 9.36.10: “and” capitalized; 9.38.3: comma instead of period after “laughed”; 9.40.4: inch’s; 10.5.6: comma after “born”; 10.13.8: comma instead of period after “man”; 10.14.7: holliday; 11.1.1: Dont; 11.1.3: comma instead of period after “afraid”; 11.2.8: comma instead of period after “foot”; 11.3.8: comma instead of period after “weakly”; 11.12.5: wrestly; 11.16.2: “Twenty” written by hand above typed “fourteen,” but later numbers not changed; 11.18.3: nitches; 11.29.11: uncertainly; 11.35.3: comma instead of period after “Ascalante”; 11.36.1: no comma after “Haste”; 12.1.4: no period after “Ridondo”; 12.4.3: comma instead of period after “Ascalante”; 12.9.3: comma instead of period after “Ridondo”; 12.14.1: comma after “Kull”; 12.21.14: hurlted; 12.23.5: tableaux; 12.25.2: terrible eyed (no hyphen); 12.27.3: semicolon instead of colon after “shouted”; 12.29.7: thime; 12.39.4: piece; 13.7.3: no comma after “speed”; 13.14.3: “back hand” (no hyphen); 13.20.1: “with” not in ts; 13.21.4: one; 13.21.7: no period after “them”; 13.22.7: semicolon instead of comma after “savagely”; 13.25.8: “back his vizor” is typed here, with “off his slouch hat” hand-written above; 13.26.3: comma instead of period after “glaring”; 13.26.13: exclamation instead of question mark after “live”; 13.28.5: no semicolon after “viciously”; 13.29.8: no comma after “and”; 14.7.7: comma instead of period after “breathlessly”; 14.12.5: comma instead of period after “sharply”; 14.26.3: exclamation instead of question mark after “first”; 14.29.6: “him” not in typescript; 14.31.12: for; 14.34.4: villian; 15.6.6: the typescript reads “particularly including honor”; it is unclear which word was to be deleted; 15.6.9: comma instead of period after “murmured”; 15.7.8: what ever; 15.19.8: a sentence was to be added at this point, but the pencil is now too faded on the typescript to decipher; 15.21.4:

unifrom; 15.24.6: comma instead of period after “huskily”; 15.25.4: t’will; 15.25.8: ’Tis; 16.9.9: the phrase “in the evening only did Ala find a chance” appears above the text, in pencil; apparently Howard intended to rewrite this passage and several others on the last pages of the draft; 16.18.4: no comma after “his”; text has been pencilled in above two lines of the typescript, too faint to read except for the words “he was himself”; 16.27.7: others; 16.33.12: wand like; 16.34.13: comma instead of period after “him”; 16.36.3: comma instead of period after “blood”; 16.40.3: comma instead of period after “blazing”; 16.40.9: knigship; 17.2.4: an unreadable sentence beginning with “While he …” is written on the typescript at this point but is too faint to be deciphered; 17.6.4: hve; 17.8.7: fightened

The King and the Oak

Text taken from Howard’s typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune

Text taken from *Weird Tales*, September 1929. No changes have been made for this edition.

The Tower of the Elephant

Text taken from *Weird Tales*, March 1933. No changes have been made for this edition.

Which Will Scarcely Be Understood

Text taken from *Weird Tales*, October 1937. No changes have been made for this edition.

Wings in the Night

Text taken from *Weird Tales*, July 1932. 61.15.11: both instances of “breastbone” occur at line breaks (see also 62.31.2); 62.4.6: “bird-man” hyphenated at line break; 62.31.2: both instances of “breast-bone” occur at line breaks (see also 61.15.11); 68.3.11: “bow-shots” hyphenated at line break; elsewhere (see 65.26.1) “bowshot” is not hyphenated; 71.14.11: comma after “fetishes”; 71.14.12: no comma after “which”; 74.35.3: no hyphens in “four hundred odd”; 78.11.1: “plays”

Solomon Kane’s Homecoming

Text taken from *Fanciful Tales*, Fall 1936. 79.7.9: period after “life”; 80.2.6: no period after “tears”; 80.31.3: “bave”; 81.4.4: comma after “place”; 81.10.2: “huonds”

Lord of Samarcand

Text taken from *Oriental Stories*, Spring 1932. 109.2.7: “to” not in original *Timur-Lang* Text taken from *The Howard Collector*, Summer 1964. No changes have been made for this edition.

A Song of the Naked Lands

Text taken from Howard’s typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. 120.13.7: freize; 121.14: Discard the bow and the bow and the dart

The Shadow of the Vulture

Text taken from *The Magic Carpet Magazine*, January 1934. 125.17.5: “the” not capitalized; 126.8.13: comma after “departed”; 130.16.10: comma after “it”; 133.35.8: comma after “supplies”; 134.30.6: digged; 137.26.7: “a” not capitalized; 141.37.1–2: comma after “counter-mines” rather than “accordingly”; 151.29.7: “she” not capitalized

Echoes from an Anvil

Text taken from *Verses in Ebony*. No changes have been made for this edition. *The Bull Dog Breed* Text taken from *Fight Stories*, February 1930. 164.17.7: doing'; 167.36.9: period after "said"; 170.22.6: one; 170.37.1: no opening quotation marks; 170.40.5: moping; 173.37.8: comma after "to"

Black Harps in the Hills

Text taken from *Night Images*. 178.1.2: Benburg *The Man on the Ground* Text taken from *Weird Tales*, July 1933. No changes have been made for this edition.

Old Garfield's Heart

Text taken from *Weird Tales*, December 1933. No changes have been made for this edition.

Vultures of Wahpeton

Text taken from *Smashing Novels*, December 1936. In the title and throughout the story, the magazine gave "Wahpeton" as "Whapeton." The log entry of Howard's agent, Otis A. Kline, lists the story as "The Vultures of Wahpeton," while a letter from Kline's New York representative, Otto Binder, to Howard referred to "your story VULTURES OF WAHPETON." In the log entry, "The" appears to have been added as an afterthought. We have chosen not to make "The" part of the title, and to use the spelling "Wahpeton" throughout the story. 195.15.8: car; 199.19.6: Glanton's; 200.8.4: six-bits; 205.2.1: tranquillities; 206.17.4: semicolon after "Middleton"; 220.3.9: semicolon after "back"; 222.12.1: wilderness-travel; 222.14.5: semicolon after "gunmen"; 224.8.7: 'S'; 244.2.4: owner; 245.24.4: comma after "roared," "this" not capitalized; 248.24.3: colon after "this"; 253.38.3: practised; 258.23.12: "as" not in original; 259.29.8: practised; 259.31.13: no comma after "could."

The original publication included a 790-word alternate ending, not included here.

Gents on the Lynch

Text taken from *Argosy*, October 17, 1936. 263. 3–5: no space between address and salutation; 269.21.10: her; 273.27.7: we

The Grim Land

Text taken from letter from Howard to H. P. Lovecraft, circa June 1931. 279.2.3: soto

Pigeons from Hell

Text taken from *Weird Tales*, May 1938. 283.33.13: “sleep-walker” hyphenated at line break; 284.11.6: “corpse-like” hyphenated at line break; 285.32.2: “hat-brim” hyphenated at line break; 285.36.11: county-seat; 287.29.5: “sunbathed” hyphenated at line break; 291.11.12: “down” repeated; 292.41.7: county-seat; 293.24.11: county-seat (hyphenated at line break); 296.32.1: “men-folks” hyphenated at line break; 302.16.9: builded *Never Beyond the Beast* Text taken from *The Ghost Ocean*, 1982. No changes have been made for this edition.

Wild Water

Text taken from carbon copy of Howard’s typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. In some cases, erasures obscured readings from the carbon; in most of these instances, text is taken from an earlier draft of the story. 312.11.13: “post-oak” hyphenated at line break, not hyphenated elsewhere in story; 312.31.10: 9; 313.29.9: carbon paper torn, “s” missing; 314.14.12: carbon paper torn, second “s” missing; 314.15.12: carbon paper torn, final “e” missing; 314.16.11: carbon paper torn, “ted” missing; 315.11.12: “low-roofed” hyphenated at line break; 315.32.3: in; 315.37.9: obscured, not in

earlier drafts, reading conjectural; 315.38.12: first letter obscured, appears that both “i” and “o” were typed one over the other but unclear which was final; 315.40.5: no apostrophe; 316.7.9-13: obscured, text from earlier draft; 317.12.3: obscured, text from earlier draft; 317.13.15-317.14.1: obscured, text from earlier draft; 317.26.1-3: obscured, text from earlier draft; 319.25.1: “ed” obscured, checked against earlier draft; 319.38.8-9: obscured, not in earlier draft, reading conjectural; 319.39.7-9: obscured, not in earlier draft, reading conjectural; 320.17.11: “re” obscured, checked against earlier draft; 320.25.10: obscured, appears to be “shaft,” earlier draft has “light”; 321.16.13: ten pins; 322.22.13: “fire-lit” hyphenated at line break; 323.1.3-4: obscured, not in earlier draft, reading conjectural; 323.6.8: “and” not in carbon; 323.7.1: obscured, text from earlier draft; 323.18.3: no apostrophe; 324.15.11: obscured, text from earlier draft; 324.32.13: obscured, not in earlier draft, reading conjectural; 325.17.5-6: obscured, text from earlier draft; 325.22.2: obscured, text from earlier draft; 325.24.10: obscured, not in earlier draft, reading conjectural; 326.7.7: in carbon, it appears a period was typed over a semicolon after “horror,” and the “m” of “My” is lower case; in earlier draft, “horror” is followed by a comma and “m” is lower case; 326.9.9: obscured, appears to be “cracking,” earlier draft has “breaking”; 326.20.10: obscured, not in earlier draft, reading conjectural; 327.4.4-5: obscured, not in earlier draft, reading conjectural; 327.13.1: Anway; 327.15.3: “aine” obscured, checked against earlier draft

Musings

Text taken from *Witchcraft & Sorcery*, January-February 1971. No changes have been made for this edition.

Son of the White Wolf

Text taken from *Thrilling Adventures*, December 1936. One complete carbon copy of a Howard draft typescript survives, with markings

and additions in the author's hand, as well as three partial drafts. These drafts were consulted in the preparation of this text. 332.22.7: some one (complete draft has "someone"); 332.36.1: comma after "rain"; 333.27.6: lightninglike (drafts have "lightning-like"); 334.3.12: hawklike (drafts have "hawk-like"); 335.2.12: Sulaiman's (in all drafts, Howard's preferred spelling is "Sulayman"); 336.24.6: *akbat;* 336.26.10: comma after "death"; 336.40.7: Istambul (in all drafts, Howard's preferred spelling is "Stamboul"); 337.13.2: semicolon after "gone"; 337.17.13: Sulaiman; 337.40.3: comma after "spies"; 338.30.1: you (drafts have "yours"); 340.14.7: Sulaiman; 340.16.4: Sulaiman; 340.39.7: Sulaiman; 341.32.13: Sulaiman; 342.19.9: comma after "then"; 344.33.1: no comma after "renegades" (comma in complete draft); 345.10.3: comma after "reward" (no comma in complete draft); 345.10.8: comma after "head" (no comma in complete draft); 348.6.10: no comma after "Musa" (comma in complete draft); 348.22.6: head.; 348.24.9: pounds'."; 350.24.14: Sulaiman; 351.22.13: "that" not in original (does appear in complete draft); 354.4.1: no comma after "knees" (comma in draft); 354.10.2: sunburnt (complete draft has "sunburnt"); 354.39.10; period rather than colon after "Olga"; 355.11.8: ear-shot

Black Vulmea's Vengeance

Text taken from *Golden Fleece,* November 1938. 361.41.13: comma after "rover"; 362.7.8: no comma after "pirate"; 363.15.12: no period after "shoreline"; 368.18.5: wine-matted; 368.23.13: comma after "rocks"; 368.24.4: "as" repeated before "they"; 369.30.7: chest; 371.27.1: "over-hanging" hyphenated at line break; 371.29.14: "night-bird" hyphenated at line break; 391.26.11: "side-stepped" hyphenated at line break; it is also hyphenated elsewhere (see 392.8.3)

Flint's Passing

Text taken from Glenn Lord's transcription. No changes have been made for this edition.

Red Nails

Text taken from *Weird Tales*, July, August – September, October 1936. The incomplete surviving carbon copy of Howard's typescript has been consulted for the preparation of this edition; variations within the printed text are minimal, mostly corrections of typographical errors. 412.26.1: Sailor's; 417.8.9: period rather than comma after "girl"; 418.6.1: "plow-share" hyphenated at line break; 420.30.4: "love-making" hyphenated at line break; 423.38.5: has; 424.20.9: Science (Howard's carbon has "Silence"; cf. 429.11.13); 428.6.6: Xotalancs; 429.29.7: "sword-thrust" hyphenated at line break; 433.35.8: Xotalancs; 438.17.5: "battle-ground" hyphenated at line break; 440.30.5: restorted; 444.16.8: "near-by" hyphenated at line break; 449.3.5: "sword-play" hyphenated at line break; 449.18.9: "throne-room" hyphenated at line break; 451.7.3: "witch-light" hyphenated at line break; 457.7.2: "wrestling-match" hyphenated at line break; 462.29.10: Techultli

Cimmeria

No original Howard typescript survives. Text taken from a typescript provided by Glenn Lord, probably prepared by Emil Petaja to whom Howard sent the poem in December 1934. 471.28.5: everylasting

OceanofPDF.com

Our deepest thanks go out to pirate and blacksmith extraordinaire, Tony Swatton, and to our friends, Bill Sampson, Gary Gianni, Michael Venables, and Mark Schultz. We'd also like to thank Rusty Burke for his generous expertise and Stuart Williams for his incredible patience, skill, and general bacon-saving. And last but not least, we'd like to thank our son, Rourke Keegan, who takes very good care of us.

Jim & Ruth Keegan

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks, and dedicate my work on this book, to Marcelo Anciano, for the vision that created The Robert E. Howard Library of Classics, for sharing that vision with me and letting me be part of the team, for his encouragement and assistance and support and the occasional *push*, for all his hard work in turning *our* work into actual books, and for his friendship and many kindnesses. Many thanks, too, to the team: Stuart, Jim & Ruth, and Steve, as well as Patrice, Ed, Dave, Glenn, Jack & Barbara, Mark, Gary, Greg. And as always, much love to Shelly, with thanks for her patience and support.

Rusty Burke

My thanks go once again to Marcelo and Rusty for making our last book together another great experience, Jim and Ruth for their excellence, dedication, and staying power. Thanks also to Mandy and Emma for ignoring me when I'm swearing at my laptop. I'd also like to say a big thank you to Dave Kurzman (kurzman@earthlink.net), gentleman and pulp dealer, for helping me with my *Weird Tales* collection.

Stuart Williams

This is to be my last book. It's been fun pulling together each project.

It has been over a decade since I first thought of and started working on a unified Robert E. Howard collection that could reach a new public.

I would like to thank everyone who has helped and allowed me to start this project. Working with Wandering Star, Jack and Barbara Baum, and now Paradox, I feel proud to have created this library. I hope that I have left a lasting blueprint for others to complete. Thank you, Judy Hanson, for the deal.

To Rusty, partner in crime: we did it, buddy. To Stuart, Stu: all I can say is, thank you, thank you, thank you. To the artists I have been honoured to work with: Gary, Mark, Justin, Greg, and finally, Jim and Ruth. All are breathtakingly talented.

I hope it will continue until all of Howard's work is together. Now I shall pick up the books as a fan.

Marcelo Anciano

OceanofPDF.com

SKETCHBOOK

OceanofPDF.com